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Wizard of The Literate Gothic

Theodora DuBois

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The Footsteps

Someone was deliberately
trying to drive Joan Rolet insane.
Who was it? And why?
"Alarming, absorbing . . ."
—New York Times

BLOOD RED

Just outside the kitchen, she realized that the floor was all wet. Her nightgown was brushing against her instep, damp and sticky.

She groped for the lightswitch in the darkness. The light flared, blinding her for a moment.

She looked down and saw that the bottom of her blue nightgown was wet and red and her white slippers were matted with wet redness. Under her feet, extending into the kitchen, was a pool of blood. . . .

VICIOUS MURDER AND A BEAUTIFUL GIRL'S MIND IN THE BALANCE MAKE *THE FOOTSTEPS* A NOVEL THAT WILL CHILL YOUR IMAGINATION AND HAUNT YOUR MEMORY.

NOTE: This new Lancer Easy Eye edition is printed on softly tinted buff paper. The greater contrast thus provided improves the format and brings it into conformity with scientifically approved standards for reading ease and comfort.

I wish to express thanks
to Dr. E. C. H. for his technical help
in regard to narcoanalysis.

T. DUBOIS

The Footsteps

Theodora DuBois

LANCER EASY EYE™ EDITIONS

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A LANCER BOOK

THE FOOTSTEPS

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CHAPTER ONE

Judge Rolet, standing at the side door of his house, thought of certain repairs that must be attended to: a new leader on the porte-cochere roof, for rain was dripping from it into puddles on the blue-gravel driveway. Dead limbs must be cut from the pine trees blowing heavily in the wind, and more limbs must be cut from the oaks and maples across the great lawn to keep open the vista down to the Hudson. And it would be well to plant more rhododendrons around the house, the white flowering ones which his mother had loved and he too was fond of. He liked now the shiny wet glisten of their leaves in the rain. He spent money on this place which he had inherited from his father. Deterioration of property, or man, of which he had seen far too much in the courts, was abhorrent to him, and it pleased him to know that the people in Claesburg, the town down the hill, said, "The Judge doesn't let his place go to rack and ruin the way most of those big mansard-roof places have gone to pieces. It's in as good condition now as it was fifty years ago."

And sometimes they would add, "It's not like Dark Hill—the Aldrich place."

The Judge could see the tower room of the Dark Hill house now across the treetops, but the sight of it, as always, stirred the pain of the Aldrich tragedy, forty years old now but still poignant and unbearable to remember. Well, he would go back into his study, by the fire; his head had been aching and he had just stepped out for a breath of air and the pleasant smell of rain. And he would ask his wife to have tea in his room instead of in the music room, and the two children would come down—and Fritz, of course—and they would have a genial half hour or so, perhaps some reading aloud: Emerson or the poets or Epictetus. He had trained his children to like the stoics as he did, but he had never made much headway with his nephew Fritz.

As he turned, he saw that something was coming up the path from the iron gate of the estate entrance, a figure under a greenish-black umbrella, like a huge, rotting toadstool moving forward toward the house. The Judge saw it, and as his eyes focused on it with intensity there came into his face that expression he had seen and pitied on the faces of so many prisoners before him.

Fear.

He moistened his lips with his tongue and whispered, although he was not aware of whispering, "If I have to go through this again it will kill me." His heart began to pound and he took a handkerchief from his pocket, unfolded it, and wiped moisture from the palms of his hands. He was a tall, spare man in his early sixties. Looking at him, you felt that here was a

person who was worn thin by his responsibilities, but a man who had sifted a valuable philosophy and wisdom from the suffering of life. Also he had kind eyes. At the moment he breathed too heavily and fast, and as the figure under the large umbrella came nearer the house he began to shake.

He had spent twenty-five honorable years on the bench of the criminal court in New York City and he was now a tired, frightened man who wanted to escape and hide in a tightly locked room.

The rotting toadstool came on, against the rain, up the drive.

Upstairs on the third floor his son Tom and his daughter Joan were in the studio. The boy was sixteen, long and angular with a clever, friendly face, a wide mouth, and thick fair hair like straw. He had inherited a Dutch strain from his mother, who was a Van Doon, but it was more in his physical appearance that this showed than in his less tangible qualities. In these he and his sister Joan were very like the Judge. As far as it was possible to do so, he now lay back flat in an old wicker chair contemplating his hands whose fingers were pointed together. Every now and then he would jerk them apart and clap the fingers into the palms. He found this exercise helpful in the development of a story he was composing, an episode in a long series of adventures after the manner of pictorial comics. Someday, he was convinced, these tales would be accepted and published and would elevate the family into the highest income brackets in the country. He was a boy with a strong sense of family solidarity.

The girl Joan Rolet knelt in front of a wooden box packing excelsior most carefully around the nose of a bronze head she was sending to an exhibition. She was a sculptress, spoken of with enthusiasm by the more discerning critics as a young woman of marked promise. Her subjects were invariably characters who had been deeply cauterized by life's acid: charwomen, steelworkers, longshoremen and such, sitters whom she acquired, much to her parents' disapproval, by wandering around New York's less conventional streets, promptly aproaching anyone who had a suitable head and, without wasting time, trying to persuade the astonished subject to come to her studio and pose as a model. She had some odd experiences, it must be admitted, but she possessed a charming confidence that she could deal triumphantly with any personality or emergency, and so far had been able to. As to her characterizations, they were done with a clear economy of line and an agreeable lack of flagrant eccentricity; that is, her scrubwomen looked as if they slopped around with mops and rags in pails of water, not as if they were three ostrich eggs put together with skewers. All in all, the bronze, the gray clay, the plasticine heads and torsos on stands about the long room were well worth looking at.

So were her own head and torso very well worth looking at. Kneeling, hammering boards across the top of the box, her body, in blue jeans and white silk skirt, had good long bones and moved with well-timed coordination, indicating that she would dance well, which she did. She was too thin, of course, in accordance with the vogue which decrees that all young girls must resemble skeletons, particularly as to the line of the

jaw; but also in accordance with the vogue she was tanned to a pleasant cookie-like hue of skin. She had a quite beautiful vivid and intelligent face with a strong structure indicating stubbornness. She was like her father's, the French, side of the family. Her eyes were dark brown and so was her hair which came to her shoulders, except, naturally, for the bang across her forehead. Her father despised permanents, and since Nature had not seen fit to endow her with curls, her hair, except when newly washed and set for a date, was too lank and straight.

Above the loud hammering of nails into the box her brother shouted at her, "Do you think it's all right for this guy, I mean this hero of mine, to have gone to some super-doctor and shifted the mechanism of his lungs and so on so that he can breathe under water and now he's there off the Banks, two or three miles under, of course, and he's found out that the Deformed Hand is there too and has cut the Atlantic Cable and he's had this girl kidnapped by a giant squid, or has that been done too often? Do you think it's sharp enough?"

"I couldn't say," Joan answered. She drove in another nail. "I don't know much about the technique of this sort of stuff. It sounds plenty sharp to me."

"Perhaps my guy could be befriended by the president of the porpoise republic, though that might be striking a juvenile note, although it might be a smart thing to do because old Murray could give me such good dope on porpoises."

Joan said, in amusement, "Yes, but not on their republics, I'm afraid." She thought with exhilarating warmth and pleasure of "old Murray" Caine, her fiancé,

twenty-nine and an entertaining soul, an authority on cetaceans and at the moment following his agreeable scientific pursuits off and on and around Cape Hatteras, a spot favored by porpoises.

A few minutes passed; the boy scowled and thought and the girl was engaged in sawing a board to fit the box top. She knelt on it and the saw stuck and then rasped, protestingly, through the wood.

A door opened in a room not far from the studio and footsteps came down the hall. A tall, thin man in his early thirties stood in the doorway. His black hair was slightly too long, his face too cadaverous and intense, his hands, with very well kept, slightly pink-polished nails, were too slender and indefinite in motion; his lower lip too full, giving him an air of petulance. He had a smoky smudge of a mustache. This was Fritz Rolet, the Judge's half brother's son, who had been brought up in the family since childhood. He to had the Rolet creative gift, but so far in his life he had lacked the tenacity to accomplish anything of significance. He would start a project, carry it on for a while with absorbed zest, then bungle it, lose interest, drop it, and turn to a succeeding enthusiasm. He was called, secretly, by Tom and Joan, the Man from Thermopylae, after the limerick,

> There was an old man of Thermopylae
> Who never did anything properly;
> But they said: "If you choose
> To boil eggs in your shoes,
> You cannot remain in Thermopylae."

But he remained in the Rolet household, and a small

independent income enabled him to be unable to take a job because of food allergies and also made it possible for him to dabble a bit in this art and that. He had been to a drama school for a year and picked up a lush verbal style, a pseudo-Oxford accent and the trick of calling everybody darling, all of which rasped the Judge, his uncle, almost beyond endurance. But then for years the Judge had found his nephew Fritz a trial and a source of concern.

"Joan darling," Fritz said now, "did you happen to look out of the window a few minutes ago?"

She shook her hair out of her eyes and said, "No, I didn't, Fritz, why?"

"Merely that I was under the impression that I saw something of evil portent approaching the house, yes, something most definitely ominous; of course I might be mistaken."

Tom emerged from his republic of the porpoises and sat up. He did not like his older cousin at all. He said roughly, "What's up? What do you mean, something ominous approaching?"

"Probably I imagined it, probably it was doubtless nothing more dire than a vendor selling shoelaces or magazines, and your mother, the personification of charity, good lady, will flood the house with them. I veritably believe that if a youth purporting to be working his way through college by the sale of red-banded coral snakes should come to the door your mother would saddle herself with a dozen or more, and just imagine the dilemma we would all be in then." He giggled slightly.

Joan, impatient with this fantasy, said, "What did you see, Fritz?"

He hated to be pinned down, but he said, "Well, I thought I saw the Perennial Menace approaching, and if I did, my two sweet loves, everything will be blown zenith high."

As fear had been in the face of the Judge, so it was now awakened and alert in his children. They looked at each other.

Joan said, "I don't believe it could have been, Fritz. That was definitely terminated last year, I'm sure."

The man walked into the room and sat down on the edge of a table. He said, "That, my darling, is a fallacy. Life does not function according to such agreeable plan. The great American delusion, the Happy Ending, exists only in popular fiction, as an aphrodisiac."

The boy Tom heaved himself up, saying, "I'll go downstairs, Joan, and find out."

She said, "Let me know if it is."

He stood in the doorway looking at her. He said, "What could you do? Or any of us?" He went out into the hall, and in a moment there was a sound as of his falling downstairs rapidly, but one knew that he was not; it was his usual manner of descent.

The girl said uneasily, "You didn't really see the Perennial Menace, did you, Fritz?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I suppose I didn't. I'm really not sure. It may be that I wanted merely to remove the adolescent from the room. Here, let me help you nail this up."

She did not object, although she knew that she could do it much better than he would. He came over to the box, took up the board she had just cut, and, in fitting it into place, put it down on one of her fingers, for her

hands were on the box top. Then, instead of taking it up at once, he pressed down, she thought deliberately, and as she said "Ouch" and he looked up at her, she saw that that was just what he was doing, squeezing her fingers under the board and watching her face to see her reaction. He had the same sort of eager, defiant look in his eyes that he used to have when she was a child and he would tease her, flicking her with lilac switches or squeezing her knuckles or, once or twice, locking her in the barn and leaving her there for hours. And afterward he would be quite literally sick with remorse.

She said now, sharply, for he had not done this sort of thing for a long time, "Take your hand up, Fritz, you're hurting me."

He pretended he didn't hear her and said, "I have the most entrancing idea, Joan. We'll get up a fashion show through the ages and you be the sole model from the beginning, with Eve, down through primitive woman in skins, and the classic Greek and the medieval with those irresistible horned headdresses—and then hoop skirts and the early-twentieth-century dresses. The early nineteen hundreds are my period, you know, and you would be enchanting in a demure ankle-length dress with high boned collar. I lie awake nights thinking how ravishing you would be in such a succession of costumes."

She said, "Fritz, you are hurting my hand!" managed to jerk free, put her fingers in her mouth, and glared at him with quite natural fury.

He sat back on his heels and said, "Oh, darling, did I hurt her little hands? Joan, I have a foul furry fiend

inside of me. Why do I *do* such things? Darling, they're all pink at the tips. I shall weep with contrition, bathe them with tears, and heal them." And he grabbed her hand and pressed the fingers against his lips, kissing them.

She pulled herself away and stood looking at him. and he, still sitting on his heels, looked up at her and grinned. She brushed her hair away from her face, said brusquely, "Don't be so silly, Fritz," and went over to her desk, searching around in the clutter there for a pen. She was not pleased with the phase her cousin was going through at the present time. She did not like the new development of his making love to her. His technique, she thought, comparing it with Murray's, was very poor, being forced and extravagant and silly. Moreover, his kisses—and she couldn't avoid being kissed by him occasionally, at least she couldn't avoid it without appealing to her parents, which would be a form of "telling on" him and absurdly childish at her age when surely she should be able to deal with anybody under any circumstances—well, his kisses were far from agreeable, lacking all flame and sweetness and being just wet lips pressing experimentally.

She sat at her desk now, writing.

Fritz crossed over to a window and stood looking out at the rain. His back gave an impression of dejection, of a long, thin, dark cutout shaped by scissors which had slipped slightly and made the shoulders too sloping and the head just slightly too much elongated. He said, without looking around, "How well you can see the roofs of the Dark Hill house from here, can't you? You know, that place has always fascinated me. . . . Did Uncle Joseph find her that morning?"

Joan said, "No, her husband found her, and he rode over for Father."

"Gad, what a somber note."

It was a somber note, the great local black-bordered legend and tragedy. Dark Hill was a larger house than the Rolets', more pretentious and elaborate by far. Warren Aldrich and his wife had lived there with extravagant happiness, entertaining in the grand manner of the turn of the century. She had been a beautiful and gay and friendly woman. But she had developed an incurable malady of the face, and the day after the doctor told her she had hung herself on the crystal chandelier in their gold and green and white drawing room. Her husband, coming home after a pre-breakfast horseback ride, found her. Nearly insane with the shock and grief, he had ridden over for his friend Joseph Rolet. Warren Aldrich himself never returned to his house, nor did he let anyone after the funeral touch a thing in the house. He had it closed and locked as it was, and so he left it to rats and moths and squirrels and leaks and time. That had been in 1906.

"Yes, it has always fascinated me," Fritz said. He drummed out the rhythm of a tune on the windowpane. "Sometime let's break in there and explore it."

She said, "That would be a nice thing to have come out in the papers, wouldn't it? 'Judge's nephew and daughter arrested for housebreaking'!"

"Publicity," he commented, "is the Great Stalking Fear of this household. For myself, I never give a damn what people think."

She didn't answer this, for there was truth in it. The family had been poured and molded in the conviction that the greatly valued dignity of the Judge's position

would be irreparably damaged by publicity. Perhaps Mrs. Rolet, more than the Judge himself, was responsible for this.

She sat writing her letter and he stood at the window whistling a quite charming small theme. Then he said, with a conscious effort to sound detached, "I suppose that the leading man will be returning soon from his engagement with the worthy porpoises?"

"In three or four weeks, I think."

"And then your heart with pleasure fills and dances with the daffodils?"

"Naturally, Fritz, why not?"

"He is *not* good enough for you, darling, not nearly good enough. He has no more appreciation of you, the beautiful core of your ego as it were, and no more appreciation of your very distinguished talent than one of his own stupid porpoises. At least your cousin Fritz would appreciate you. But of course everybody hates me and despises me. I never do anything, I never accomplish anything. I'm no great legal light or scientist or literary gent. I know it. I see myself and despise what I see."

This too was a familiar mood of his, but his voice sounded so depressed that, generous and quick with sympathy as Joan was, she felt sorry for him and thought that she had judged him too harshly, that he was not nearly so odd and difficult and unwholesome as she sometimes thought. And, too, he was one of the family, and therefore, of course, "all right" and a person to be cherished and helped in his unhappy moments. Also, sometimes he was appealing and amusing and stimulating.

"Don't be silly, Fritz," she said. "Nobody despises

you. You can be a great dear, you know. Your Shepherd's Dirge is going to be wonderful, and we all love you."

He turned quickly, smiling at her with sweetness and friendliness. He said, "Darling, you have just handed me, on a white jade plate, one of the golden apples of the Hesperides which will comfort and sustain me for weeks. Perhaps you don't know it, but disapproval, particularly your disapproval, grips and twists my viscera as if you had given me cyanide. But now"—he spoke almost with briskness—"I shall return to my piano and compose with genius." He played a little soundless obligato in the air with his long fingers and went out of the room.

She sat, chewing the end of her pen, thinking about him and the problems he presented in the household, and in a moment the most delightful theme came from the piano in his room, pastoral and quiet. It was from the Shepherd's Dirge he was composing. It would be, if he ever finished it, a beautiful and accomplished masterpiece, something, his friends and even his enemies thought, which might well be accepted and played by the Boston Symphony or the Philharmonic.

Five or ten minutes passed while from the piano in his room shepherds walked beneath willow trees in meadows and nymphs emerged from sun-flecked streams, and a bull blundered into the idyllic scene, introducing a modern contrast of humor.

Then footsteps came running up the stairs.

Joan recognized them as her mother's. Her mother always ran upstairs, always hurried, driven by the desire to convince herself and everyone else that she was under such constant pressure of work and respon-

sibility that she must live life at the gallop. Yet, intense as she was, she had a certain Victorian quality of elegance of person and appearance. She was small and thin, with a haughtiness of face and stiffness of manner which put people off until they knew her well. Then they thought her, usually although not always, as nice as her husband and children. She was—except when gardening, when she was a comic figure in blue jeans—a very well put together woman with the neatest of unwaved gray hair and, usually, dresses of striped silks or cottons, expensive and made to order.

Now as she reached the top of the stairs Joan stepped out of the studio.

Mrs. Rolet, gasping slightly, said, "Joan, it has cropped up again."

"The Perennial Menace? Fritz thought he saw the approach, but I didn't believe him. I thought it was *over*, Mother." She sounded afraid and a little resentful.

"We all thought it was over, but it seems it isn't, and how your father can face it this time I don't see."

"Every summer," Joan said, "every August, it comes as regularly as delphinium."

"Delphiniums come earlier in the year, darling, and are so much more pleasant than this."

"Which is actually more like some fetid fungus."

They were taking it lightly because underemphasis and a pretense of humor and self-control were tenets of their code. To give terror a flippant name belittled and diminished it, at least that was the theory, the civilized way of treating fear.

Mrs. Rolet leaned against the banisters. Above them light came with a dim liquid quality through the skylight and rain thudded down against it. Once, years

ago, Joan remembered that a mouse had died above there and you could see the little blob of its body through the dusty glass and it made you think and wonder too much about life and death and why you lived and died and what happened then in that final, incredible darkness.

Mrs. Rolet was a very much worried woman. She said, "Why did it have to happen today? Your father is feeling so very far from well."

"His blood pressure?"

"Yes, and his head aches so. The poor dear—I could —Sometimes I feel"—and she spoke with a strange, quite unladylike savagery—"that I could take actual *pleasure* in violence. Joan, my dear, I can't *bear* it for him."

"It's outrageous!" Joan was fingering one of the buttons of her shirt nervously. "It's not to be permitted. We should have some protection. It's intolerable that a man of his standing and value can't be protected from this sort of persecution."

"I know!" her mother agreed and rubbed her hands together. "But it all boils down to a matter of publicity. Publicity would destroy him."

"But he must have some help," the girl declared with indignation. "I'll go down and help him deal with it."

"But how can you possibly?" There was no humor now in Mrs. Rolet's voice. The humor had sifted off, leaving only the husks of whispered fear.

Joan too was whispering. She said, "It's gone on too long. I'll do something. If we don't it will kill him."

And the mother said, "You mustn't. I forbid it. It will only destroy you too."

"Where is Tom?" the girl asked. "He went downstairs."

"I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him."

They stood looking down over the banisters into the depths of the house as into a great dark well, and a few sounds floated up, like bubbles: the maid Cora clanging the oven door in the kitchen, a clock striking the half-hour, and a discordant, tentative chord now and then from Fritz's piano testing a sorrowful passage in his dirge. There came the sense then of submerged, antagonistic voices. The mother and daughter looked at each other.

Joan started down the stairs, running, her mother following, descending into the deep pool, the quarrylike bottomless pool of shadows where fear ebbed up and lapped about them, sucking them down further into this rising tide of terror that would drown them all.

Moments passed.

A viscous red bubble of a scream spiraled up to the top of the house and the rings spread and spread slowly, extending wider and further; lapping, finally, against a strange and remote shore of consequence.

A week later it was still raining. The woods were sodden now, the trees moving in tired heaviness before the wind. They had borne this burden of rain too long.

Pine Street extended past the Rolets', past four or five other old places of similar type. It then went down a hill, along Miller's River, and merged its identity with Main Street in the little town of Claesburg. But near the top of the hill, about a quarter of a mile from the Rolets,' a path called Fern Lane went off to the right and followed up the river to Old Barn Road, where a bridge

crossed the stream. This was over the line of the next township, Millersville.

The river was flooded, roiled with mud. There was something it had been working at for some days to move from among the rocks just under the west side of the bridge. Bushes with their feet in the water had concealed this object, but the stream wanted to get rid of it and pulled and pushed it about impatiently, frothing over and around it. Finally the strengthened current worked it away from the bushes and rocks, swept it out into the center, carried it down and deposited it, face in the mud, on some shallows; then the water wiped its fingers fastidiously among the reeds and fled on more quickly, gossiping to the trees and birds and wind.

Two small boys in shiny rubber raincoats and hats and carrying fish poles stopped on the bridge and looked over at the shallows.

"Oh my gosh, what's that?" one squeaked.

"What, where?"

"Somethin' lyin' over there in the mud—see!"

"What is it?"

"It's a corpse—a body, you drip you."

"Naw, you're crazy. It's a dead dog, see the hair on it."

"It's not a dog, it's a woman."

"Naw, it's a man. It's a dead man."

A car was driving toward them in a splatter of muddy water from puddles.

"Hey, mister, mister!" the small boys shrieked, hailing it.

The car stopped and a man got out, listening to their confusion of explanations. He leaned on the low para-

pet of the bridge, looking. Another car drove up and stopped. Then another.

Somebody went, gingerly, squishing through the wet river edges, to investigate. It was raining harder than ever now. More people came and more people, and the little boys constituted themselves excited masters of ceremony.

Joan Rolet, bicycling home quickly to get out of the rain, stopped at the bridge and watched.

The mailman driving by stopped for a few minutes and then went on, distributing the news with his mail.

It was a long time before the constable came and then the ambulance from Poughkeepsie, but the ambulance was quite unnecessary.

Many people had joined the crowd on the bridge before the sad, repellent body was taken away.

CHAPTER TWO

In early September, New York is a city of waning heat and bright sunshine and winds having the faintest flavor of salt as they blow in from the harbor or the rivers. There are flowers massed along the pools of the entrance to Rockefeller Center, and the flags fly, and the fountain plays beneath the great gold Prometheus who leaps eternally through his golden ring. Crowds pour along the sidewalks, women in thin flowery dresses, men in summer suits, and cars, gleaming, choke the streets, and jewels and fabrics and raiment beautiful beyond the riches in the tales of Scheherazade are displayed in the windows of shops. It is almost as in the late fall or winter or spring months, but not quite, not really, for everything is sifted over with a quality of illusion, caused by the shimmer of heat, perhaps, or by that sense of the nearness of the sea.

Joan Rolet, walking up Fifth Avenue, thought that it was as if the city with its buildings and streets and people were those brightly colored liquid images sliding down the inner sides of a bubble as it drifted along, bouncing a little in the wind. Presently it would be

pricked and would burst in tiny glittering drops and only the wind would be left then.

And where would one be oneself?

She shivered slightly and glanced back over her shoulder. If anyone had been watching her particularly, had picked her out from the crowd because she was young and possessed beauty and a quality of grace, the person watching would have been impressed by the fact that she looked back over her shoulder so frequently and quickly and with an expression of dread in her eyes.

And she herself was thinking, "The trouble with me is simply and solely the Rolet imagination. Nothing else. I am not going mad, and the minute Murray kisses me I shall be all right again and this crazy manifestation, whatever it is, will be over and I shall not let it get me into a panic."

She had come into the city to meet Murray Caine, who was arriving at La Guardia Field in a few hours. Thinking of him, she forgot her reasons for fear, and love mixed with her blood and flooded swiftly through her system of veins and arteries, inflaming her with elation. The thought of Murray and their plans to be married in the spring, and their optimistic hopes for a small New York apartment, preferably a penthouse with green window boxes where they would grow parsley and lettuce and beans and tomatoes and petunias, entertained her all the way up to her parents' brownstone-front house in the East Seventies off Madison Avenue.

This had been the Rolets' winter house for nearly fifty years.

As Joan let herself in the front door she stepped into

cool dimness and a smell of linen furniture covers and assorted moth preventatives. She closed the front door behind her and the heat and the city noises were suddenly cut off with a knife and tossed into the past. She stood still at the foot of the stairs and looked up, listening. Her heart beat too quickly.

"I will not be a fool about this situation," she thought, and resolutely went on up the stairs. "Two or three weeks of it is more than enough. I simply will not give in to such manifestations of hysteria."

Her room was on the third floor, and here in this town house it was still a little girl's room with furniture dainty and just slightly too small, and the accessories and decorations and pictures were outgrown too, lovely Kate Greenaway chintz, and pictures of Alice and the Dormouse and the Mad Hatter, and pictures too of Christopher Robin; and the books were chiefly those classics of her mother's childhood, the Jungle Books and the Katy Books and a complete set, of course, of Louisa May Alcott. But Joyce's *Ulysses* lived scandalously between *Little Women* and the *Swiss Family Robinson*. How horrified they would have been at such a neighbor as Dedalus!

Something made Joan stand tensely, with her eyes frightened. Her heart was accelerating and her hands were too cold and damp. She tiptoed to the door and into the hall and leaned over the banister, listening. Something was moving about downstairs, walking very quietly . . . Or was it? She went back into her own room, opened the door of her closet, moved aside her hanging dresses and the cellophane bags, and got a hockey stick from a corner. Grasping this firmly, she went down the stairs, down one flight and the next, to

the front hall, where she stood on the tiled floor trying to keep from trembling. She stood there listening, and now the sounds seemed to come from upstairs. Perhaps something had been hiding in her mother's or father's room on the second floor. She should have hunted through them, looked in all the closets—but how dreadful if she had come upon a burglar crouching among her mother's dresses. However, it was impossible to allow oneself to be a coward. From the time of her childhood her father had read her all the brave poems defying fear, and in moments of stress she summoned phrases from them as armor. Now, remembering that she must thank whatever gods there were for her unconquerable soul, she knew that she would have to go back and look into those upstairs closets to prove that she was no weakling, no "craven lurking along the battle's edge," and convince herself that there was no reality in this terror.

It took courage to return and go through her parents' rooms, where the faint smell of 4711 and of shaving cream almost evoked the presences of her father and mother. The sliding doors were open between those alcoves which, characteristically of the houses of that period, contained set-in washstands and closets. And in her father's, crouched down below his hanging suits, was a figure—or no, it was only a suit that had fallen. It was nothing. Nothing. It was just another fantasy, a "chimera," as one of her French governesses used to say, which she must control or she would become a manic depressive or a schizophrenic or one of those other modern terms for a hideous mad person.

Perhaps, she thought, she was that already. Perhaps

they would have to send her to an asylum. She thought of that article written by young conscientious objectors, exposing conditions in certain asylums; the picture of lost and desperate naked creatures herded together in bare rooms, of forlorn women mourning on benches, and of the stories of neglect and beatings, medieval in brutality. Rather than be subjected to such conditions, she would quietly, before being "put away," simply choose her own exit from life and go out of it, walk not run, in order not to create a panic. Even if they took away her shoestrings and belts and scissors, she knew that she could find a way. Why couldn't you just hold your breath?

She started up the stairs to her own room again, and halfway up there she heard something downstairs. She thought, "If I take a shower, it will be all right. Nothing ever happens in a shower," and she ran on up to her room.

In a few minutes the rush of water over her body was cold and reviving to the spirit, but you could not stay forever safely in the center of the sound and feeling of water. You had to turn off the faucets, shiver in the slowing drip, and emerge. But she waited, pretending that she was standing naked on a hilltop in the rain.

The blue shower curtain with its design of marsh grass and water and white herons was not pulled all the way across the bar. Joan happened to glance toward the bathroom door.

The knob was turning.

Her self-control slipped and she just caught herself back from the brink of a scream, for up to now she had only heard, never seen anything beyond reality.

And what if the door opened of its own volition, as it was opening, and nothing came in! But no, for a man's hand with very pink nails came inside the door, and then her cousin Fritz's head appeared.

She had clutched the opaque bath curtain about her and so was decently clothed, with only her head out, staring at him. Feeling for the faucet with her left hand, she turned the water off and shouted, "Kindly get out!"

Disappearing, his embarrassed voice said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I heard the water running and couldn't imagine—" The door was still on a crack.

"How long have you been in the house?" she called.

"Two minutes approximately. I just came in."

She wondered if the two minutes were a fact or could it have been he following her, dodging here and there through the rooms, cleverly.

"Shut the door tight, please," she ordered.

"Okay. I'll see you downstairs."

The door closed and she, trembling, stepped across the floor and turned the key in the lock, wondering how she could have been such a fool as to have neglected to do it before. She toweled herself and dressed, putting on a jonquil-colored silk with brown detail which made charming accessories of her eyes and hair. Then, after brushing her hair until it looked its best, for it was waved in honor of Murray's return, she went downstairs. It was not too pleasant being here alone in the house with Fritz. You never knew quite what he was going to do next.

Aside from his present trying phase of wanting to make frequent love to her, his ordinary behavior was always apt to be erratic and disturbing. He had gone

through a period—this when he was a sophomore in Yale—of hanging on the walls of the rooms by the picture molding. The purpose was to strengthen his finger tips for rock climbing. He was going to be a great mountain climber. His enthusiasm waned, however, after getting stuck three quarters of the way up East Rock in New Haven, being rescued by the fire department, and spending the night in jail, to say nothing of the subsequent fine.

But now his enthusiasms were focused on music, and Joan.

She found him in the pantry eating stale crackers and cheese. His hair was more than ever in need of cutting, and his brown suit should have been pressed.

She said, "I thought you were with Kenneth James in Red Bank."

"I came up for the day. I left all the oboe part for my dirge here or at Claesburg, and I can't go on without it. Kenneth thinks it's all extraordinarily good. He thinks there isn't a question but that the Philharmonic or the Boston Symphony will snap it up the first shot. . . . Have some cheese; it's all but swarming with whatever cheese does swarm with, and the crackers are absolutely moldy and foul."

Seeing, however, that this was more than a slight exaggeration, Joan helped herself.

"This pantry," he said in disgust, "is fairly thick with cockroaches. A whole parent-teacher's association meeting of them scattered into the cracks as I entered. Did you know that cockroaches once dominated the world and grew to enormous size? And of course man is definitely on the way out. Doubtless man will dwindle and haunt the pantry cracks of the next world con-

querors. Wouldn't that make a moving picture, though? Infinitesimal men and women scuttling away into greasy drains? I think I'll try a script."

She said brusquely, "Don't be macabre, Fritz."

He made a gesture with his shoulders and said, "I'll try not to, darling, but it's hard when you're made that way, isn't it? By the way, what are you doing here? I know—you came down to meet the leading man with a fanfare of trumpets. Well"—he applied cheese to cracker with such savage vigor that the cracker broke —"damn, all over the floor—all I can say is"—he was picking crumbs up—"that I hope the blasted blighter appreciates it, I don't suppose he does. He can't appreciate anything except his entrancing porpoises. My God, Joan, honestly I don't think I can stand by absolutely muzzled and speechless and see you making the mistake of your life."

She said, "No muzzle could make you speechless, Fritz. I wouldn't worry about that impossibility."

Sometimes he could look disturbingly angry, and then again he could be one of the sweetest people in the world. But he was in a bad mood now. He said, "What I'm worried about is your marrying a man with the mentality of a sea creature. Darling, do you know what will happen to your beautiful mind after you've been married to that marine moron for ten years? Your mind will be able to cope with the comics and perhaps, possibly, a little light bridge with a few other ladies of the local bridge club plus nuts and candies on the tables on Monday afternoons. And your exceptional, your really distinguished talent, do you know what will become of that? It will have deteriorated to the point where you never touch clay, except to press your chil-

dren's little fat hands into gobs of it, to make Christmas ash trays for Grandpa and Grandma. And do you know what will happen to your beautiful, long body, reed-slender, reed-graceful?" He put his hands on her shoulders.

"Fritz, let's cut this scene, please."

"Do you know what will happen to it through ten years of childbearing and dishwashing and floor-sweeping—imagine a river reed, bloated and grown fat and middle-aged and obese. Sacrilege, darling, sacrilege, and a man will go to any lengths to prevent sacrilege."

He slid his left arm under her shoulder, tipped her head back, and kissed her. It was not a restrained kiss, nor did she enjoy it.

"Don't you think I'll ever hand you over to another man," he said.

Extricating herself, she said, "Fritz, you're behaving in a very silly manner." It was always wiser not to take him too seriously. "And why do you always mark Murray down so consistently? He's far from a marine moron. He's considered a sound scientist, one of the best of the younger men at the museum."

"Exactly. I should have him stuffed and put in a habitat group with his companion porpoises. In fact, I should take pleasure in doing it myself. Darling, why do you keep looking over your shoulder?"

"I don't."

"Don't contradict your cousin. You do, you know you do, and it's a recent mannerism you've acquired, my pet. Come on now, tell Fritzi what's the matter."

"You're being the champion conclusion jumper again," she said, spreading another cracker with cheese.

"Are you going to be here alone tonight?" he asked.

"No," firmly. "I told the parents I was going to spend the night at Betty Clyde's apartment."

"It's just as well, perhaps. Even the best man is not composed of iron. Darling, how is my uncle, the Judge? Was it a serious stroke that he had?"

She looked troubled. "He's better," she said. "It wasn't serious; only his left hand was affected. I think he'll even regain the use of it before long. Dr. Tillingham let him get up yesterday."

Fritz took his knife and with it beat a rhythm on the sink board. He said, "Well, I certainly hope that everything is going to be all right. But I must say, my child, that now and then I see the Rolet family as a group dressed in skintights and spangles walking a tightrope suspended just below the roof of Madison Square Garden, with no previous training and experience *and* no net beneath; the Judge, my uncle, leading, and next my good charitable aunt, and then you, my darling, and the blithe but extremely maddening Tom, and myself tripping along behind—and tripping is the word."

She said breathlessly, "What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean." There was a pause during which he looked at her. "Cora told me," he added.

She said, "Cooks always know everything."

"Yes, and so do cousins."

"And what are you going to do, Fritz?"

"My dear," he answered, and all the flippancy had dropped from his voice and manner, "I am a Rolet, and as I say, I too am with you all on the tightrope."

She said, "Thank you, Fritz. Sometimes I think you are really rather exceptionally sweet. . . . No, there's

been enough of that. I'm going out now. Shall you be going back to Kenneth James?"

"As soon as I can root out my parts for the oboe from a haystack of paper. It's like searching for a needle in a pine tree. That's pretty good, don't you think, Joan? I thought it up last night and have been waiting for the opportunity to use it. . . . Well, give some poison from me to the leading man when he alights from the airplane. And I suppose I'll be seeing you next week in Claesburg?"

She said, "I suppose you will," and then impulsively, "Fritz, *why* do you put that lacquer on your nails? It's getting pinker and pinker."

He looked at his nails as if he had never seen them before and now found them objects of interest and fascination. "Why, so they are pinker and pinker, aren't they? Darling, it amuses me and it amuses Kenneth too. He thinks it's an original touch; and you know I don't give a damn what the general public thinks about me. That's one advantage of being the complete nonentity. You don't have to strain to live up to *any*thing."

Joan said, "You would find that difficult, wouldn't you?" and went off, leaving him still eating cheese and crackers and with his mouth full humming bits from his dirge.

CHAPTER THREE

It was good to get out of the house, to be alone in the telephone booth in the corner drugstore, for you had almost the same safe, enclosed feeling in a telephone both as in a shower bath.

Joan called Betty Clyde who worked for *Time* and whose brisk, clipped voice was an antidote for terror. "Oh, Joan," she said, "I'm frightfully sorry I can't have you at the apartment tonight, but I'm taking off this afternoon for Westhampton and I've told Maxie Canadee he can have my rooms, but at that there's a perfectly good studio couch as well as the bed in the big room and I'm sure he'd love to have you—"

"I don't doubt it. No, thanks. I'll either go back to Claesburg or stay at the town house."

"Well, why not; you'd certainly be a lot more comfortable than being a flagpole sitter in my place with Maxie."

"Absolutely, and I doubt if Murray would be pleased. He's old-fashioned about women, you know."

Betty laughed tolerantly and said he was sweet.

That led to an agreeable discussion of Murray, his

imminent return and his recent activities in the vicinity of Hatteras. It is curious what satisfaction you derive from talking about a person you are in love with. Joan felt fairly luminous after two minutes' gratifying dialogue on this subject. But finally it was necessary, because of Betty Clyde's mountains of work that she had to wade through, to terminate the conversation. Then, looking at her wrist watch, Joan saw that she had, as usual, cut her time too close and she would have to rush like the wind to reach La Guardia Field when Murray's plane was due.

However, also as usual, she was on the spot with a minute and a half to spare, her customary clearance.

Joan went out onto the railed esplanade and watched the planes taking off and arriving; the huge, glinting silver creatures circling and sliding gradually down their ramps of air, landing gently, coming in over the flat land to their appointed spots and being met by scurrying attendants pushing out the wheeled, high flights of steps.

She stood there by the rail in the sun with wind blowing her yellow dress about her, tossing her hair and blowing excitement through and through her.

There was Murray's plane coming in over the field, descending, sliding to its station.

She hurried downstairs to the proper entrance, and there, soon, in the midst of the scene of speed and arrival and expectancy, she saw him and felt that now that he was home nothing could ever assail her happiness.

In his jealousy Fritz Rolet did him injustice, for Murray Caine was not, nor did he look in the least like, a marine moron. He was a quick, definite young

man with glasses, and he was intelligent and gay. He wore a gray flannel suit, he had tow-colored hair, worn in a short crew cut, and he was very much tanned. His parents came from North Carolina and he still retained much of the pleasant Southern accent and manner of speech.

He dropped his bags and kissed her. And here the audience, although an audience engaged in more or less the same emotions and actions, made an embrace a little hurried and perfunctory. Still, as an experience this was very different and far, far more enjoyable than being kissed by Fritz. This with Murray had an effervescent, stimulating, yet deliciously weakening effect, and one desired repetition.

Having kissed her, he looked at her, smiling. He said, "Honey, you certainly have traditionally classic lines combined in a design that will please the most discriminating. But you've been going around losing off some weight, haven't you?"

"Seven pounds in the last two weeks."

He said, "You're the prettiest thing between the North and South poles, but I tell you the truth I could pull you without any squeezing right through a wedding ring like a most lovely blue scarf of real silk my mother bought at Liberty's in London."

She said too quickly, with overemphasis, "I've been trying to lose intentionally, eliminating starches and so on."

"When we're married I'm planning to feed you on an *ex*clusive diet of chocolate cream candies until you gain fifty pounds. Come on out and get a taxi, honey, I'm as eager to kiss you some more as a small boy is

to get into a circus tent when the band's playing and the elephants are marchin' in."

Presently, in the taxi, they sat with Murray's arm about her and her head comfortably on his shoulder. He put his glasses in his pocket, and as the taxi sped over the Triborough Bridge they kissed each other frequently.

It's a very pretty day in all respects, isn't it?" he said. "I tell you I've been lookin' forward to this day."

She said, "Darling, you really have the most wonderful head. I'm sure I could get a prize on it. When will you let me model it?"

"Now that suggestion poses a lot of problems," he said. "I sort of think they're insuperable. In the first place, you'd have to be across the room from me, wouldn't you?"

"More or less, darling."

"Well, the less the better."

"Things usually come the better the less."

"No, they should be the better the more."

They laughed a little. Joan said, "No, really I want to model your head," and she ran her fingers over it lightly and expertly, feeling the bones of his forehead and cheeks.

Enjoying that, he said, "well now, Joan, the trouble is that when I'm with you I seem to have quite a right few diversions that are much more important than being a model."

"Diversions?"

"Not that? I'd say they were certainly occupations with a high pleasure value."

"You still aren't striking quite the right note."

"Kiss me some more and I'll get it the next time."

The taxi driver snorted. The set of his shoulders showed that he was tolerantly amused.

"Honey, I have it now," Murray said. "It's delight, just plain delight."

"*Plain* delight!"

Did I say plain? It's certainly not plain by any means. It's very, very highly colored delight which all goes whirling and jumping around like those pretty little glass bits in a kaleidoscope. Honey, when I was a little boy and went to birthday parties in a blue suit and a white collar the birthday child always got a Kaleidoscope and I always wanted one and even used to consider turning thief to get it away from him but my good Christian upbringing wouldn't let me, so I *never* got to get one. Look, honey, will you give me a kaleidoscope on my birthday?"

"A dozen," she said, "if you will give me a music-box, one of the funny ones that play when you sit down in a chair or put on a hat. I've always adored them!"

Promising her a dozen music boxes at Christmas, and all funny ones, he proceeded to get out of the car, for it had stopped in front of his club. He paid the man while Joan stood by on the sidewalk.

As she stood there with Murray's two bags beside her she heard the footsteps again, approaching from behind her, and she turned and looked quickly but there was only the sunny sidewalk and at the moment a few men going in the other direction, toward Fifth Avenue. But the footsteps had been coming toward her. Now they had stopped.

"It was nothing," she thought, firmly reassuring her-

self. "There was absolutely nothing," and she said, "Murray, I'm starving." So, by asserting it was nothing it became nothing, or nearly, and they went into the building gaily and presently were upstairs in the dining room ordering lunch.

While they ate jellied consommé he told her with enthusiasm about his porpoises who had sacrificed their lives nobly for science. It was inexplicable why he had enjoyed himself so among them, for he seemed to have spent at least sixteen hours a day in a miserable little shed of a laboratory measuring their newly stripped bones, getting, as he said happily, "the proportion of the length of the beak to the total length, the length of the tooth line, the length of the mandible, the length of the snout to the eye, the height of the dorsal fin." And she tried to listen intelligently because this, she thought, was a sample of their future table conversation for the next fifty or sixty years and if she only learned about it she would be as fascinated as he was. But at the moment it was difficult to concentrate on porpoises when every now and then she heard those footsteps behind her back.

It wasn't so unusual, she told herself. Other people, doubtless quantities of other people, had been followed around by unseen things. There had been Orestes. She had always liked and been sorry for him, pursued for years by the Furies, and now she, Joan Rolet, had her own private Fury, although the circumstances were far from similar.

"Murray," she said, not realizing how oddly she was interrupting him, "what is your opinion of Orestes? I mean, what do you think was the explanation of the Furies following him?"

It took him a moment to jerk himself back from porpoises into very ancient Greece, but he had an agile mind and a sense of humor that delighted in incongrous contrast. "Orestes?" he said. "Let's see now, the lad that got himself all worked up and killed his mother and her lover. I haven't thought much about him, Joan, since I was in college and we had a drama course with a little bald professor who made me cry when he read the *Trojan Women* to us. Honestly, honey, a lot of us cried like babies when he read about that grandmother and the Greeks taking away that nice little kid to throw over the walls. But there were three Furies who followed around after Orestes, weren't there?"

She wished now that she had not introduced this subject, but she said that there were three, she thought.

He said, "Now I've never given much thought to him, but he's a very interesting character. My guess is that he had those hallucinations because of some natural guilty feelings about those murders and so on he'd committed."

"But do you suppose they're always caused by guilty feelings, Murray?"

A roll that she was holding in her fingers broke and crumbled on the tablecloth.

He said, "Well, I wouldn't know, Joan. I'm no psychiatrist. I'd say he'd have been helped a lot in the solving of his personal problems if he'd been able to go to a good psychiatrist."

"Perhaps he wouldn't have wanted a psychiatrist to find out about the—matricide."

"Maybe not. That's where he'd have been better off

if he could have gone to a Catholic priest and gotten it off his chest."

"A priest," she said, and she sat for a minute, thinking.

He watched her, worried, wondering about this conversation.

"But if he had gone to a priest, would the priest have gone to the police, I mean the ancient Greek equivalent of the police?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've never been in his position, honey," he said gently, and then asked, "You expecting somebody, Joan?"

"No, why?" There was quick defensiveness in her voice.

"You've just been looking over your shoulder a few times like you expected somebody to join us."

"Heaven forbid," she answered, and made herself speak lightly and sound amused. "I don't want anybody else, darling, on the day you've just come back. Go on about the porpoises."

But he did not feel in the mood now even for his dear cetaceans. He said, "Look, Joan, has that cousin of yours, the Man from Thermopylae, been making a nuisance of himself?"

"Not much more than usual. Don't look so disgusted and apprehensive, Murray. I can deal with him perfectly adequately."

"Well, I hope so." He sounded dubious.

They started on lobster salad rather silently.

Joan said, "What's bothering you, Murray dear?"

"Just thinking about your cousin. I hope you'll excuse my saying this, but he impresses me as being a

character that has about as much value as a squeezed-out lemon half; you know on a farm those particular remnants of garbage are rejected even by the chickens, who aren't noted for their being fastidious."

She said, "Please, Murray, that is unkind."

"Honey," he said seriously, "I just don't trust that man." He had more reason to distrust Fritz Rolet than he had formerly, for he had met a man who had known Fritz some years ago when he was living in Greenwich Village in New York and from this man he had heard certain extremely unpleasant stories, one of them involving a cat found in Fritz's rooms. Now a dozen cats found in a man's apartment would be a nuisance, but no implication of the abnormal, necesarily. However, half a cat was another matter, and the man's very uncomplimentary analysis of Fritz had not been confined to the cat.

"The point is," Murray said, and it was fortunate that he felt it impossible to elaborate on the subject, "you never know what the lad will do next."

"That's true," she agreed, and ate more lobster, which was very good indeed and the sauce for which was particularly delicious. And, eating slowly with detached enjoyment, she wondered why it was that whenever Fritz criticized Murray she was fired with rage at Fritz, and when Murray criticized Fritz she was, if not filled with rage, at least annoyed at Murray. But perhaps she was fonder of Fritz than she thought, or the claims of kinship demanded that she leap to protect him.

And while she was thinking this she became aware of that sound again, approaching from behind her, and

she looked back and there was nothing there, nothing at the moment except the people at their tables, and not any waiters coming from the kitchen.

She heard her voice saying breathlessly, although she tried to sound matter-of-fact, "Murray darling, could we possibly change tables, do you think? Sit at the one at the bench along the wall?"

He was sweet. He didn't object or question her further or even seem to think it an odd request. He told the waiter that there was too much draft where they were, and in a few minutes the change was made and Joan was sitting with her back against the wall.

By a superhuman effort then she made herself talk blithely and persuaded him to talk again of his experiences off Hatteras, and when he asked her about her family, contrite because he hadn't done so before, she told him about her father's stroke, but made it seem not too serious, and she was amusing about Tom and his adventure series and his protagonist's proposed meeting with the president of the porpoise republic. She told him, too, about the head of the gardener she had sent in to the exhibition, and he was interested and pleased about that, although never quite as enthusiastic about her work as she wished—not even quite as appreciative as Fritz was.

And now it appeared that Murray would not be able to be with her this afternoon or even in the evening. He had to report at once to the museum and then, as soon as possible, to rush out to Smithtown, where his mother and father lived. His mother had had, the week before, a coronary thrombosis. He said that he would take Joan along out to Smithtown but there were two

nurses in the house and not an inch of room anywhere. He himself would have to sleep on the living-room couch.

"And it would be frightfully bad for your mother anyway to have me appear," she said rather unhappily. "She loathes me so because I'm a damn Yankee."

"Oh, she doesn't really, Joan honey. She's quite reconciled to you, and Father was all for spreading the crimson carpet down our front steps for you from the beginning. But Mother always was all unreconstructed. Look, honey, if you're going back to Claesburg tonight there's no telling when I can see you again."

She said, "No, I'll stay in town—at our house."

"Are the family there?" in surprise.

"No, they're at Claesburg. They always stay there as late as possible."

"Fritz isn't in town by any chance?"

"He was, as a matter of fact, this morning, but he's going right back to Red Bank. He's visiting there."

They had finished their lunch and were going out of the dining room. Murray, walking behind her, said, "I don't much like it, honey, your being in that house alone."

"Why in the world not? You sound just like my parents. I'll be perfectly comfortable. I'll turn on the gas—"

"Turn on the gas!"

They stopped outside of the dining-room door and looked at each other.

"Darling, let me finish my sentence, do." She spoke with some asperity. "I have no intention yet certainly of sticking my head in the oven. I started to say I should turn on the gas under the hot-water heater in

the cellar and be able to take all the showers I want."

"I suppose you can," he said. "But it just seems to me sort of an odd entertainment for a whole evening."

"Not the *whole* evening! Darling, don't *carp* at me." She was distressed to hear herself speaking almost sharply.

He said quietly, "Honey, I wouldn't carp at you. I wouldn't carp for all the gold in Mr. Tiffany's store up on Main Street here. But what *is* wrong. Can't you tell me?"

There was such kindness in his voice and in his eyes, and such love for her, that she had an impulse to throw herself into his arms then and there and weep on his shoulder and tell him the whole thing, the entire wretched, frightening story, and he would smooth her head and kiss her and say, "There, honey, don't worry, it's nothing," and he would be able to do something to make it all right. But you can't do that in a club. It is impossible. The other people, the nice, conventional people, would look at you with withering disapproval. She shook her head, keeping tears back.

"Nothing's wrong, Murray," she said. "You'll call me in the morning, won't you? Perhaps we can have lunch together."

"I'll call you at four o'clock if you wish."

"Make it eight. Murray, you're a darling, and I love you."

"Double that for me," he said. "I'll be seeing you."

Out of deference to their surroundings, they did not kiss but nodded at each other. He went off, troubled about her, and she stood for a moment at the door thinking of what he had said about Orestes, thinking in defiance, "It is not a guilty conscience," and then,

as if in mockery, there were the steps again, approaching her. But no one was behind her. Absolutely no one. And there was a shower downstairs. She could take a shower there and stay in it perhaps fifteen minutes, but after all, that would be a form of self-indulgence and cowardice. To be a coward was to be a white worm, a lily-livered weakling, a creature entirely devoid of self respect and without an unconquerable soul.

She smiled at the hat-check boy, who would have liked to send her an orchid and take her to a night club.

As she went down the steps and turned eastward toward Fifth Avenue the footsteps followed her.

CHAPTER FOUR

September, the Judge thought, was always the loveliest month of the year at Claesburg. There was a sharp lift in the air then from the Hudson Highlands. The trees began to flame with color and there was the smell of leaves and bonfires and of goldenrod, which fortunately gave none of the Rolets hay fever. The Judge lay in a long canvas deck chair in the sun, very glad indeed that he had prevailed upon old Tillingham to allow him to get up a few days ago and get out.

He had had a stroke and he would have to accept the fact and not dwell upon it or upon the wretched cause of it. He would not allow this to become a hindrance of the will. He would not waste his energy in regretting or in rebellion, but would "rise above it," as his mother used to tell him in regard to life's trials. His mother had been such a beautiful, distinguished woman.

It still hurt him bitterly to think of the sorrowful time of her illness and death, and today he seemed to be thinking of it so often, to be stepping back and

forth over the threshold of the past too easily. He supposed it was because he was still not quite himself. But he would be all right in another week or two, he told himself firmly. He would be all right and back at work in New York. And in the meantime he would not worry, but would relax and enjoy the sunshine and the garden here, where it was very pleasant and nice to be with his wife at her gardening.

Mrs. Rolet was rather a funny figure this morning in blue slacks and a short gray smock. She had a blue ribbon tied around her gray hair, as the Greeks wore laurel or bay-leaf wreaths. With a flat basket by her side she knelt on a rubber kneeling pad and grubbed vigorously in a flower border, one of her dearly loved chrysanthemum borders where she had allowed a few weeds to creep in.

"We'll have the wedding here in June," she was saying rather loudly, because she couldn't take time to turn around to talk. "Joan would rather have it here than in the city. Wouldn't you? This is really the perfect place for it. We'll have the ceremony in the church, of course, and the reception here. I'm afraid it will have to be a large reception, Joseph. I should really like a bride's cake and wedding cake in boxes, and sandwiches and an orchestra and spun sugar and ice cream in forms."

"That's all right," he reassured her. "I have that special bank account just for the children's weddings."

She said, "You're wonderful, Joseph," and fished out weeds with more energy even than before.

Her husband was amused but inexplicably made to feel a little stronger by her appreciation. Love, he thought, was a most mysterious and complex factor in

life. Love, as to its sex aspect, so exhilarating and disturbing in youth; then mature love, a delightful and quiet friendship although shot with vivid color now and then; and the love of a mother for her family, which was strength-giving and yet could sometimes be alarmingly, even dangerously protective; and then filial love, so deep and life-lasting, such as he had had for his own mother.

Should he, he wondered, have done differently in regard to her? Of the two tragic paths that lay before him, had he taken the wrong one? You would think that after sixteen years you would stop suffering and remembering, but ever since, at the most inopportune times—on the subway, in the middle of a case in court, at night when the moon was high and dogs barked on some distant farm—there again would come that old question and the unhappiness.

There had been a special evening when Alice was having a dinner party of eight.

He said now, "Alice, do you remember that dinner party before Tom was born when I took the ice cream up to Joan?"

His wife turned around and said, "Yes, and it made her so sick."

He said, "Yes, and remember there was the low bowl of water lilies on the table."

She said, "They make a lovely table decoration, don't they?" and turned again to her weeds.

The sun was hot and very pleasant. Beyond the chrysanthemum borders shrubs and a few tall pines further back made this space a small out-of-door room. Sunlight glinted on pine needles. There was a pear tree over among the bushes, and hornets gorged themselves

drunk on fallen rotted pears. One of the hornets now, in drowsy happy state, flew over to the Judge's hand and he moved it, toppling the creature off.

He closed his eyes and the sun and the garden slipped away and he was upstairs again, sixteen years ago, in Joan's room sitting on the bed with his arms about her, her dark hair soft against his chin while she ate her ice cream. Then he tucked her up and kissed her, and with the ice-cream saucer went down the hall.

There was a low night light in his mother's room, and always there a dim smell of medicine and of illness, and the fragrance of roses which stayed on the bureau night and day in defiance of the accepted theory that flowers in a sickroom vindictively drink up all the oxygen in the atmosphere and smother the patient.

The Judge, thinking of this, stood by his mother's bed, and she opened her eyes very wearily and managed to smile at him.

He said, "Mother, shall I put the flowers out in the hall?"

"Thank you, no, my dear. A pleasant death to be suffocated by roses—so much pleasanter than Desdemona's—her father should never have allowed her to marry that man." Her poor weak voice, with the humor in it, nearly broke his heart. "Joseph dear," she said, "you have such a reputation for kindness and pity. I want you, please, to give me just a small overdose of morphine and end this—pain."

He put the ice-cream saucer down on the table, sat on the side of her bed, and took her thin hand in his.

He said gently, "Think of the headlines, dear: 'Judge murders his mother.' "

She smiled again, realizing that this must be treated

with a lightness, as he had touched it in his tone of voice, but it was not possible to keep it so, really. She said, "My dear, it would be a mercy killing and you could make a test case of it."

"I'm afraid not, dear."

The pain was sweeping up again, about to break in a surf over her. She drew in her breath and said, "You should have courage for that, Joseph. Consider it."

He patted her hand and looked up to see her practical nurse, a Miss Noorham, coming in the room. Miss Noorham, a good nurse but an unattractive small woman with such repellent ears, he thought, like long oyster shells. And was she trying, he wondered, to "make up" to him? He would have to watch out, because that sort of thing in one's house could be serious.

He stood and said to her, "I'm afraid my mother is in considerable pain."

"I'll give her something then," the nurse said. She had a sharp, rasping voice that grated on his nerves.

He glanced in the shadowy mirror, saw for a moment a curiously arresting picture of himself who seemed not himself but a strange man in dinner jacket, a fine-looking, forceful, thin man in his forties, and at his left a bowl of red roses and behind him the nurse in white, staring at him as with hunger. Very disturbing indeed. He must get out of the mirror, into reality again.

He straightened his tie and went toward the door.

His mother's voice came from great distances, very near the gates of death itself, but still not near enough, "Aldrich was more courageous, Joseph. I should have done as she did, years ago."

"No, my dear," he said, "we cannot usurp the power over life and death."

"Joseph, how absurd and illogical you are." Her voice was much stronger. "How many sentences have you passed upon people?"

"That is different, very different," he said. "Go to sleep, Mother. I have to go back to the party."

"Good," she said, "I wish you had them more often. I like to hear laughter in the house. Good night, my dear."

So he had gone back downstairs to the living room, where Alice had everyone playing pencil-and-paper games, Categories, he remembered, making lists of statesmen and flowers, trees and rivers, and good characters in fiction and evil characters in fiction beginning with an H.

They had been very pleasant, those dinner parties, genial and friendly and charmingly carried out as to food and flowers and service. How accomplished Alice was in the house; clever, gracious, and able.

It was as if he came out of the past and was lying again in the fragrant sunlight, and Alice got up from her kneeling, a little stiffly, and came over and sat on the end of his long chair.

"Don't tire yourself, my dear," he said, smiling at her. She had a streak of dirt on the side of her cheek.

"Why I have the constitution of a horse," she said.

And perhaps she had, he thought. These delicate women often do have more resistance than peasants. But then hadn't she always existed on a diet of worry about this and that, and he supposed she had been upset about his illness.

He was surprised when she said, "Joseph, do you ever feel troubled about Fritz and Joan?"

"Yes, I do," he replied. "I don't like the way he's been looking at her the last month or two."

"Still, I don't think he's in love with her, do you?"

"I think he would like to experiment with being in love with her. He's always experimenting." He spoke with irritation.

"I also think he is jealous of Murray Caine," Mrs. Rolet said. "He doesn't want to give Joan up to another man."

The Judge said, "Caine is worth two dozen of Fritz —if he is my brother's son."

"This Shepherd's Dirge is really remarkably good," his wife said.

"If he finishes it. I'm sure I don't know how poor Walter ever came to have a boy like Fritz. Really, Alice, he disturbs me more and more all the time, and those red nails of his are positively indecent. Can't you get him to take that stuff off them?"

"That isn't the sort of thing you can speak about," she said.

"And I don't like that friend of his, Kenneth James. I don't like anything about him. I hope Joan hasn't run into Fritz by any chance in the city. I don't like her going alone in all those bad districts. She's too pretty. And it wouldn't be at all the thing if Fritz and she should be there in our house."

"They won't be there in the house," she reassured him. "He is with Kenneth James and she is going to stay with that friend of hers, Betty Clyde. Now don't get yourself worked up, dear. I'm sure that fundamentally Fritz is all right."

"Well, I suppose so; after all, he is one of the family."

Realizing this, they both felt better, sustained by the bright and very general illusion that any member of one's family is naturally a little better than anybody not of it. Mrs. Rolet said she would have to go up and have a bath and put on a proper dress for tea. They would have tea out here in the garden if the hornets left them alone, but the creatures were so drunk with rotten pears that probably they wouldn't have the slightest interest in anything as non-alcoholic as tea.

Then Tom came out of the house, very long and bony in khaki shorts and nothing else except sneakers. His parents felt the most unreasonable but extreme emotions of pride as he came toward them. He sat down, cross-legged, on the grass, grinned at them, said he had just been playing tennis at the club with Slip Woodwarth and had trimmed him. Now he was going to cut the grass, after he had a coke. He lay back flat with his arms under his head looking at the sky. He seemed tired. His father thought that lately his spontaneity had been a bit forced, as if he were not quite well or had something on his mind.

"Do you feel all right these days, Son?" he asked.

"Oh, absolutely, sir, fine, except I'm not sleeping too well."

"Don't take sedatives. I have a horror of a habit of sedatives."

"I wouldn't touch them. I just turn on the light and read awhile or go downstairs and get some milk."

His father was reassured and the subject shifted and for some minutes Tom and his parents had an agreeable discussion of the clothes he would need for school, and what courses he thought he would take, and how

everybody else was dropping Latin but he really liked Latin believe it or not. If he was going into the law, he thought it would be a smart thing to know Latin.

"It would indeed," his father said, enormously pleased at this revelation. "So you're going into the law, are you? Of course I should like that, but I never want to influence you unduly. I thought you were going to make a fortune in your adventure sequences."

"Oh, yes, of course that, but I'd like to have the adventure sequences as a side issue. They're a little superficial as a lifework, I think—just a bit juvenile."

His parents glanced at each other, thinking of course that there never had been such perfection of appearance, mind, and spirit in any sixteen-year-old boy.

And as they sat there in the sun, high, hysterical, and very unpleasant laughter came loudly to their ears from the direction of the kitchen.

The boy sat up quickly and they all listened.

"What in heck?" Tom said.

"It's Sora," Mrs. Rolet said, "but she's alone. Nobody is in the kitchen with her this afternoon."

"Perhaps Miss Perrone's Selma has come over."

"I don't think so."

Tom was already running across the grass in the direction of the servants' wing of the house, and the laughter still persisted. There was something mocking, almost impertinent in it.

The Judge said, "Very unpleasant sound, I must say. Alice, has it ever occurred to you that Cora and Fritz have some sort of alliance of long standing?"

She was shocked. Obviously it never had occurred to her. "My dear, no, it's not possible." She implied

that members of one's family did not have alliances with one's cooks. "You can't mean an—an emotional alliance?"

The Judge, who believed that well-bred women should be protected, regretted mentioning any such impropriety. He said quickly that of course he had not meant any emotional relationship, naturally, but, well, perhaps a strategic alliance. This vague generalization let him out.

The laughter had stopped.

In a few minutes Tom strolled back again with a frosty cool coke bottle in one hand and a large chunk of gingerbread in the other. He said that he had found Cora sitting in the kitchen rocking chair leaning back and laughing her head off. She said it was just that she was thinking of something funny, funny enough to split your sides it was, but she wouldn't tell him what."

"Just as well, perhaps," the Judge said. "You can't always tell what is going on in the minds of these respectable, dour women."

"I think she had just got a letter," Tom said. "I thought she stuck some papers under her apron as I came in the door. Well, I'll go and cut the grass."

The Judge lay in his chair, and the shadows grew longer and longer. He listened to a thrush singing below the bushes, to the sound of water running in the bath upstairs, and to the noise of the lawn mower.

And then the cook Cora began to laugh again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Joan shopped that afternoon of Murray's return, alternately accompanied by the terror and free from it, but it was with her when she had a supper of a cheese sandwich and malted milk at a drugstore. It was as if the presence were standing behind her, impatiently waiting for her to get through and out on the street again. Passing a young Irish traffic officer, she was tempted to stop in the middle of the street and ask, "Would you mind telling me if anything is following me and asking it not to?" But that would cause intolerable consequences, ending probably in the psychiatric ward in Bellevue. "My dear, we all have our individual crosses which we must learn to bear," an old aunt of her mother's used to say. And if these footsteps were her cross she would have to learn to endure them. After all, they did her no harm, so why should they make her so nervous? Just sounds, just, undoubtedly, nonexistent sounds. It was absurd to feel the deep, instinctive conviction that they were made by something which hated her.

She went to the movies, and there it was possible, by

keeping her mind on the adventures and vicissitudes of Claudette Colbert, to forget her own. Some children on her left kept making foolish remarks in too-audible tones and a young man on her right tried to hold her hand in the tense moments but she discouraged him and enjoyed her three hours because it was as if that which caused the footsteps had thankfully sat down and rested, but not far away.

At eleven Joan slid out from her seat and went up the aisle with a furtive sensation, thinking, "I hope it's asleep, that it won't notice my leaving. Perhaps I can shake it off." She walked over to Fifth Avenue, took the bus uptown, and was sufficiently relaxed to enjoy the lights, the cool winds, and the shadowy buildings stretching to the black sky and the stars.

Sitting on the bus, she felt happier now, thinking, "It's over. Even the thought of it was unreal," and she remembered how when she was a child her mother had discouraged the fanciful games she used to play, the invention of shadowy playmates; Jack-Francis when she was under the influence of the Swiss Family Robinson and played cast on a desert island in the little river near their place in Claesburg. And there had been Eric, the fifteenth-century page, when she was steeped in Medieval England and *Men of Iron*. Her mother, who had been born a sensible, practical Van Doon, had so often said, "My dear, you're just like your father. Don't allow your Rolet imagination to run away with you. Don't you think it would be very nice to go down into the kitchen and ask Cora to let you make a spongecake for tea?" And that had been right, and it was a Good Thing—her family had a habit of capitalizing very good things—

that her mother did keep her feet on the ground. Somebody in a family had to.

Murray was practical too, a little like her mother. He was basically, by nature, personality, and training, entirely unlike Fritz. Murray was wonderful. He was a thorough darling and he would call promptly and briskly at eight in the morning and plan some delightful pleasure for later on in the day.

If Fritz said he would telephone at eight, the bell might ring at nine, or it might not ring at all. You never could tell about him. But he did appreciate her heads and so on. He had a quite beautiful feeling for sincerity of effort and accomplishment.

"I suppose it's a fault to like to have people think my work is wonderful," she thought, although like most people she wasn't convinced that she had any faults. "I suppose I am frightfully conceited about it." Then as she got off the bus and walked down the side street she thought, "I've beaten the footsteps. I've dropped them off somewhere," and that, as she went on with the night wind cool in her face, was enough to make her feel as if she had picked up a thousand-dollar bill in the gutter.

But after all, it never does to be triumphantly complacent, to boast even to oneself. The next hours were for Joan comparable to Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. It would never have been pleasant to go at this time of night into a house that had been closed all summer, through the still rooms, down to the kitchen floor and lower, to the cellars, where the furnace was a huge dead beast with its open door of a mouth. Joan lighted the gas for the hot-water heater and stood there letting the match burn almost to her fingers. All

through the rooms as she walked the steps had come after her. When she stopped they stopped. They had not come down the cellar stairs, but they were waiting above, just at the turn outside of the kitchen, and she was more sure than ever that they were caused by something malevolent, that when they caught up with her she would, in some hideous way, meet her death.

She would never dare go up the cellar stairs past the kitchen again.

Tiptoeing, she crossed the cement floor to the stairs up which the ash cans were carted. Cobwebs caught across her face and there was a smell of dank stone. These stairs gave out, by way of a slanting cellar door, to the city back yard. She longed to be out there now, in the darkness with the clotheslines and the catalpa tree and the sour-earthed flower borders where no flowers ever grew. But the bolt on the slanting door was rusted and she couldn't move it although she pulled and struggled until she was out of breath, and those footsteps seemed to be coming down the stairs from the kitchen.

She turned, facing the cellar.

With her heart thudding she thought that perhaps some actual man was in the house, some such person as her parents feared, and in a minute she would see his squat, brutal face peering at her. But the steps came nearer, and there was nothing.

Her foot pressed against a loose brick and she picked this up. The cellar was lighted by a low-watt bulb suspended near the furnace. It swung a little on its wire as if brushed by something's head, and this was more than Joan could endure. It was too much!

She threw the brick straight in front of her, shouting

crazily, "Go away, stop bothering me!" and her voice echoed and re-echoed and she thought, "Now I am going mad," and ran back straight through the cellar and up the three flights of stairs to her own room, where she slammed and locked the door and turned on all the lights.

Fortunately her own bathrom adjoined her room, although there was a door into the hall also, but it was not necessary for her to go out into the hall to reach the shower. However, she had the sense of something waiting outside of her door and she wondered if Fritz Rolet could possibly be in the house, if, after all, he had not gone back to Kenneth James's at Red Bank. Still he did not appear and, as earlier in the day, the rush of water over her body and the pouring of the water seemed to cut off and wall out the terror with a falling curtain of liquid. She stayed there until all the hot water was gone and it ran colder and colder and she remembered that there was a kind of madness which manifested itself in too frequent bathing. And if she were going mad she could not marry Murry Caine. She could not marry Murray and transmit this dreadful inheritance to her children. She was not going to have Murray's and her darling little towheaded sunburned children followed around everywhere and frightened out of their wits by anything of this sort.

"Mummy, Mummy, that *Thing* is following me again!" And a child screaming and running to her and clutching her around the knees until she lifted him up and he buried his soft little sobbing face in her neck.

She herself was nearly sobbing at this point, but she toweled herself, put on blue silk pajamas, and took a book from the shelves. It was a copy of Epictetus

which her father had often read her, and she opened it now and read, "Seek not to have things happen as you choose them, but rather choose them to happen as they do and so shall you live prosperously. Disease is a hindrance of the body, not of the will, unless the will itself consent. Lameness is a hindrance of the leg, not of the will, and she thought, "These footsteps are a hindrance of my mind, not of my will, and I shall not be a fool about them!" but as she thought that and turned a page and began to read again there were the sounds, prowling furtively up and down the hall outside her door.

She must have slept, around morning, for she was awakened by the telephone's ringing and there was Murray Caine's voice incredibly comforting.

"Honey," he said, "how are you? I've been thinking about you all night. You all right this morning?' '

"I'm fine, I'm splendid. Much, much better than I was two minutes ago."

"Honey, you surely are no result of assembly-line production."

"Why, I'm just one little unit of a mass output."

"Not Miss Joan Rolet. She has sparkling beauty cloaking rugged strength and dependability."

"I'm not so sure about the dependability, darling."

"You don't mean you're a streamlined fluke?"

She said, amused, "What is this new line, darling? It shows the influence of a certain peculiar literary style."

He said with eagerness, "Ma'am, I've been studying the most fascinating literature written in modern times, which is boat advertisements, and honey, you and I are going to invest in the sweetest little doggoned sloop

you ever saw and go on a cruise on our wedding trip observing porpoises. Doesn't that make your heart hop around doin' tap dances of joyous anticipation!"

She laughed and said, "It sounds wonderful, Murray."

"You ought to say that different, honey, with more power in it. You come over to the museum and I'll teach you how."

"All right, I'll be right over. I'm not dressed yet."

"Well, I tell you the truth, honey, I was glad to hear your voice. I was worried about you being in that house alone last night. I woke up two or three times thinking the ghouls had got you. . . . They didn't?"

"They didn't, darling."

"Sure?"

For a moment she couldn't answer him. Something was moving outside her door.

"What's the matter, Joan? Is something the matter?" with no humor in the voice now.

She made herself laugh a little. She said, "Darling, no, what could be the matter? I shall get up and have a shower and dress and get some breakfast. Perhaps I'll do a little shopping and then I'll turn up at the museum. Will you be in your office?"

"There or thereabouts. Come on up and somebody will know where I'm at. Okay then. I'll be seeing you." There was the sound of his hanging up.

She jumped out of bed and rushed to the shower again.

And after that the presence disappeared. It was nowhere to be heard. She dressed and put on a pale blue-green silk dress with a print of small seaweed and amusing sea creatures, this because Murray was so

fond of it. Nothing pursued her through the halls or down the stairs, and she stepped, unmolested, out of the front door, closing it firmly behind her. For a moment or two she stood on the high front steps, enjoying the sunshine and the wind, and, released from terror, she was swung high into happiness. The day, she thought, was delicious; you could slice it into crescents like a melon and serve it on a lovely blue glass plate with ice!

Her breakfast, at a smart, exceedingly expensive place around the corner, was equally delicious: melon, but on a green plate, coffee and French rolls, sweet butter, marmalade, fried eggs and bacon.

"I'm all right," she thought as she went out onto the sidewalk. "I'm a well woman. I don't have to worry about that now. I shall simply lock the door on the whole affair and never think of it again."

She walked to the corner, got a bus, and went downtown, where she stopped successfully for a while and then, in a state of elation, she went up by bus to the museum, through the vast entrance hall, and took the elevator up to the office floor.

His secretary said that Mr. Caine was in the library, in the stacks, reading. To reach them you had to go down a long corridor, as long, Joan thought as she hurried down it, as several city blocks. However, she was unpursued, and, not to tempt fate, she nearly ran and came finally to the room with its desk and asked the librarian for Mr. Caine.

He was at one end of the stack room, peering through his glasses at the shelves. In any library, as librarians or earnest readers discover, these sections

offer most favorable protection for amorous interludes between periods of heavy scientific or literary research. The shelves and shelves of books provide even more adequate privacy and comfort than leafy lanes because here, for one thing, there are no ants or spiders, and also the smell of paper pages and leather bindings and dust conveys a dreamy sense of remote seclusion from an interfering world.

As Joan appeared, looking slightly flushed and breathless from her hurry, Caine looked at her, smiled, and pocketed his glasses.

"Beauty, performance, economy," he whispered into her neck below her ear. "Plus velvety smoothness."

"Darling, your new verbal line is certainly distinctive."

"Easy handling—finger-tip control."

"Darling, somebody is coming."

"Nobody—nobody. I love you."

They kissed each other.

After a few moments passed with mutual enjoyment she drew away and sat on a corner of a reading table swinging one foot. She was wearing nylons and extremely foot-flattering white-and-brown pumps, and even if she had been shod in wooden shoes her feet and legs would have been attractive, they were so well made.

Murray was leaning against the stacks regarding her with pleasure.

"You look sweet," he said. "That's one of my favorite dresses."

"That's why I wore it," she admitted. "How is your mother?"

"A little better, thanks. You know, I lay on that dog-goned sofa in the living room and worried about you all night. What did you do last evening, honey?"

"I saw a movie and took the bus back to the house and went to bed and read a little Epictetus." So briefly, she slid over the surface of the night.

He said, "You don't have to go home to Claesburg today, do you?"

"I haven't decided."

"Decide against it and stay in town and put on one of your dresses that looks like it was made of rose petals and we'll go somewhere and dance."

She laughed at him a little and said, "You're frightfully Victorian about women, aren't you?"

"Well, I do like to see pretty girls wearing dresses that look like flowers or butterflies. It's right nice. I'm not so taken with the humid Central-American tiger-woman type. I've got to go downstairs now, and you meet me in the Hall of Ocean Life in about forty minutes and we'll go in early to lunch."

"All right, in forty minutes, downstairs."

"And while you're here improve your mind on the subject of porpoises, because, honey, you don't know nearly enough about them for one whose life is to be dominated by them." He took his glasses out of his pockets, took a handkerchief, and wiped them, smiling at her.

She smiled back. "I've always wondered how they nurse their babies," she said. "They're so streamlined, apparently not at all like cows."

"That's right," he said. "They keep all the necessary apparatus in sort of slit pockets."

"I see, neatly fastened with a zipper."

"That's right, and it's all very tidy and efficient except when the zipper sticks."

"Like galoshes at a party."

"Exactly. Any further physiological details you'd like to know about them?"

"Well, not now. We'll go into that later."

"Okay then. I'll see you downstairs. I've got a lot of books out about them on that table by the window."

She sat looking over roofs and at the summer sky and a few white clouds above the high buildings, and she did do a little desultory reading about the porpoises, learning odd facts here and there: they swallow their food under water, except when they are young and nursing; they eat ninety pounds of fish a day and bear one young in the summer. If you ship them alive, dry, they become overheated and develop blisters from which eventually they die; and they are caught chiefly off Hatteras for extremely valuable jaw oil used as a lubrication for—

Two people were talking somewhere out of sight near her.

"I'm using this head."

"I'd use this one. There's something very wrong about that."

"It's more squat."

"Yes, I'd be very cautious of that thing."

There was a sound of the pages of a book being turned over and then, furtively, approaching, the footsteps were no more than thirty feet away.

Joan got up, slipped quitely down one row of stacks to an intersecting alleyway, and went along that until she came to the door. She was out in the corridor, which seemed to extend to infinity, and on either side

there were hundreds and hundreds of filing cabinets and lockers, and there were doors of offices of purchasing agents and directors of this and that department, and doors half open into rooms being decorated while their owners were on vacation. Then there were myriads of tall cases of drawers and she glimpsed such labels as *Mammals*, *Pleistocene*, *Hungary*, and *Mastodon*, *Americanus*. The drawers, which had no tops, were full to the brim with bones, and you saw, even hurrying, even almost running past, bits of great teeth and foot bones and lower jawbones and huge skulls. Usually she delighted in bones because of their amazingly intricate efficiency, because of the incredibly successful engineering of the animal body, but today, with those footsteps following, coming nearer and faster, those bones meant death, meant thousands and thousands of single experiences of paralyzing terror, of agony, and death.

And the footsteps went step, step, and then a tiny click, as they always did: step, step, click. What did the click indicate? It was so faint you could hardly hear it, but it was always there, unmistakably.

If she only knew what was following her she could bear it! If she could only turn and see something, no matter what! It had seemed to help when she turned last night and shouted and threw the brick at the Thing, and ran toward it and through it, but she had no brick now, only her purse, and what if she should suddenly yell out at the top of her lungs, as she was tempted to, "Go away, stop bothering me," and did hurl her purse back down the corridor. Why, she would find herself in Bellevue before lunch, even, which perhaps was really where she ought to be!

But she had reached finally the side corridor which led to the elevators, and here was a glass case holding the comparative series of the feet of primates and another case showing "Our Face, from Fish to Man."

She came to the elevator at a fortunate moment, just as the man was about to go down, and she slipped in and he closed the door quickly, she hoped squashing the Thing as he did so. But perhaps it had just been left outside and would turn and come hurrying, step, step, clicking down the stairs and meet her at the bottom when she got out.

You should have a diver's suit when you go down the wide stairway to the Hall of Ocean Life. There is a dim, underwater atmosphere which makes you feel as if you were moving with slow and heavy steps among gently waving seaweed, while fishes like shadows flick past your ear.

Joan sat on a bench before a habitat group of Pacific walruses, vast brown creatures with tusks. Beyond them birds were flying over a background of green-gray, icy water. Here, for the present at least, she seemed free again, or perhaps it was that the "step, step, click" was merged in the sound of numerous other footsteps, shuffling and moving over the tiled floor. Voices echoed, as if the setting of this were inside a vast convoluted sea shell. Closing your eyes, you could almost hear the roar of surf on a beach.

Then Murray Caine's voice was saying, "Hi, Joan, asleep, honey?"

She opened her eyes, looked up at him, and shook her head.

He sat on the bench beside her and smiled at her. He had a magazine in his left hand. "I brought this

along so we can look at advertisements of boats while we're having lunch. Look, Joan"—he spoke with excitement—"I'll take that five thousand dollars my grandpa left me when I was a little boy in knee pants. We'll buy this sloop they're advertising in here and we'll sail away, cruising up and down the coast and in the inland waterway every year and study the life there and you can make groups of porpoises and shore birds and we'll be just as happy as two little colored angels sitting on a white cloud sucking lollipops and bangin' on a drum!"

She had a glimpse of sun and wind and the sea and of birds flying over a tawny shore, and she and Murray would be sitting in the cockpit of their small boat, and what could be a more perfect life, ever, anywhere in the world! And after all, what was there to prevent it?

She said, "Murray darling, nothing could be more absolutely superlative."

Then behind her she heard the sound: the step, step, click.

It was as if a wind were blowing off the icy ocean in the habitat group. It was impossible to keep from shivering. She gripped the edge of the bench with her hands, but she still shuddered, more and more violently, until her teeth were actually chattering.

Caine was alarmed. He said, "Joan, what's the matter, honey?" and he took her hand.

She said, "Murray, darling, I can't marry you, possibly," and she knew that in giving him up she was renouncing normality, that she would slide down an iced hill, faster and faster, to fall over the precipice of actual insanity.

"Of course you can marry me," he was saying with

indignation. "What in the world's the matter honey; what's wrong? Have you got a chill?"

"No, but listen. Do you hear anything?"

They listened. He said, "I hear a lot of people moving around and voices talking and echoing."

"Not that. Something different. It's no good, Murray. I can't marry you. That's all, darling. That's flat."

"Why do you think you can't marry me?" he was demanding.

"Because of Orestes."

"Orestes? What in heaven's name has Orestes to do with us?"

"He was pursued by Furies the way I am, and I'm not going to marry and pass on Furies and insanity to our children." She was almost weeping.

He smoothed her hand and said, "Joan honey, I've been worried about you ever since I landed yesterday because you seemed so thin and your eyes had a look in them that was right unhappy, that is part of the time. But don't you go confusing yourself with the old Greek lad Orestes. That's not good sense. And I swear to you and cross my heart you haven't got any insanity. What makes you think you have, honey child?" His voice dropped to a very gentle inflection.

She answered simply, "Murray, I have hallucinations. I've been hearing foot-steps following me everywhere for weeks."

He showed no surprise or horror, and that was comforting of him. He smoothed her hand a little and said, "What sort of footsteps, honey?"

"They go step, step, click, step, step, and a very tiny click, almost as if they might be those huge misshapen feet that are in the case on your office floor,

those feet, you know, of the mountain gorilla that was caught west of Lake Kivu in the Belgian Congo, a gorilla with one nail clicking, perhaps."

He said quietly, "But it doesn't seem probable that a gorilla is following you, does it?"

"Of course not. Why should he?"

"You've never seen this thing?"

"No, never. If I had, it wouldn't be so terrifying. You don't mind what you can see."

"Have you any idea at all what it is? I mean, you don't really think it's a gorilla, do you?"

"No, not really. It might be a man, or a woman."

"How do you explain the click?"

"I don't explain anything. Unless it's something carrying a very thin cane with a metal ferrule at the end. My grandfather had a little gold-headed swagger stick when he was a young man."

"Could it be your grandfather? He's dead, isn't he?"

"Years ago. But why should he be following me everywhere?"

"Honey, I tell you the truth, I agree with your parents that you shouldn't be staying in New York at night alone the way you do." He flexed the fingers of her hand and was relieved that her trembling was abating. "How long have you been hearing these steps?"

"For about three weeks, I think, since that rainy week the beginning of August."

"That was about when your father had his stroke, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but that couldn't have any connection." She spoke too quickly and emphatically.

"What else happened that week?"

"Nothing absolutely."

He was silent a moment or two, puzzled about how best he could help her and feeling much more troubled than he showed. He said, "Look now, there's no reason for you to go on worrying about this at all. Everybody has odd things happen now and then. Why, when I was a little kid in knee pants I made up a friend named Mr. House-plant, and Mr. House-plant used to go around everywhere with me, to church even, and although he was all conjured up out of nothing, honey, I could tell you today what he looked like, tall and red-haired and jolly with a big Adam's apple. Now your doggoned steps are like him."

She said in a heartbroken voice, "Darling, *no*, they're not like your Mr. House-plant. He was a game made up by a sweet, funny little boy. But when you're my age, when your imagination breaks out of its bars and chases you all over the city, something is really wrong. And another thing, I believe that as long as you act normally, without overstepping the boundaries of your usual behavior, then you are normal. And I suppose that as long as nothing shows on the outside you could go on thinking the craziest things that ever were. But the minute you deviate from the accepted, the usual behavior, then it is serious, and you're just about a subject for an asylum." She began to shiver again, thinking of naked women in asylum cells.

He held her hand tightly. "How has your behavior been deviating from the accepted standard?" he asked quitely.

Well, I take too many shower baths, for one thing, and then last night when I went down to the cellar to light the gas for hot water, these damn steps followed me, and I tried to get away and then I shouted out at

the top of my lungs for it to stop bothering me and I hurled a brick at it, at nothing, Murray. I threw a brick just at the air, Murray darling, and I realize that I might do that sort of thing any minute again, turn and shout out and throw my purse, and that's plain insane, you know."

Even at that he didn't seem shocked or horrified. He said, "You're nervous, that's all. I don't believe you've been sleeping very much, have you?"

"No, not much." She was nearly weeping.

"Could Fritz Rolet have been snooping around in the house last night, trying to scare you? It would be just like him."

"No, not possibly; at least I don't think so."

"I think you better see a doctor and get something to pick you up and then you'll be fine in no time. Come on, we'll go out now and see a doctor."

"Now? Then you do think it's urgent. You do think I'm crazy." She gripped his hands with both of hers.

"Honey, I'm telling you the truth. I don't think you're crazy. I do think your doggoned Rolet imagination has got the whip hand of you and is running you ragged and you ought to have some sort of a sedative to give you some rest. Will you go to a doctor?"

"I don't know who. I won't go to the old owl in Claesburg."

"I don't want you to go to any old owl. I'll find a good one for you, may I?"

"No damned psychoanalyst."

"Okay, just a good intelligent doctor of some sort. Don't you honestly think you'd better?"

She sighed and said in a very tired tone, "I suppose I had, because I know that when those ghastly steps

catch up to me I'm going to be killed. And I feel as if I were being followed around by some great force of Hate, you know the way you felt Hate come out of the radio years ago when Hitler was making his speeches."

For the first time, then, Murray's voice did sound frightened. He said, "Look, honey, just try to control yourself a little. That's all nonsense, you know. Come on, we'll go and get some lunch and look at pictures of the boat we're going to buy."

He held her firmly by the elbows as they went up the stairs, but even so, It was still there, triumphantly following them.

CHAPTER SIX

Marshall of the museum, who knew a lot about doctors, told Caine to go to Jeffrey McNeill and tell him the whole story. McNeill was the man to handle any situation out of the ordinary. Actually he was a surgeon, one of the big wheels in the medical school of his university, and as a side line he and his wife were consultants in crime detection.

"But there's no crime involved in this," Caine hastily assured Marshall.

"I know, I know, and I realize you couldn't tell me much about the circumstances, but still I think the problem is on the mysterious side and the McNeills are the ones. They have imagination."

"Just now my life is overstocked with that commodity," Murray Caine said.

Nevertheless he put in a long-distance telephone call and made an appointment with Dr. McNeill.

Sitting in their living room while the Irish maid went upstairs to announce him, he was interested in the extremely modern mood of the house, at the effect

produced by silver and glass and chromium and blond wood with the overstuffed chairs and sofas covered in striped aquamarine and a darker blue. Over the fireplace, which had no mantel, and a portrait, surrealistic, of a more than usually beautiful woman in the early thirties. Her hair was the color of corn silk when it is exactly ripe, and her eyes were brown, intelligent, and kind. She wore a blue-green velvet dress and was placed against a background of the sea. In one corner were devils stuffing a dead man into a large Italian vase, and in an upper corner three small fat cherubs with wings and inadequate garments of blue ribbons pulled on a rope attached to an apparently loudly pealing bell.

Murray Caine stared at this expensive masterpiece and wondered uneasily if perhaps it wouldn't have been better to go to someone a little more conventional than the McNeills.

However, the woman who came down the stairs was in no way alarming. She was the subject of the portrait, but in a reasonable, restrained brown linen dress, nor was she accompanied by scarlet devils or naked cherubs. She shook hands and said in a very agreeable voice that she was Anne McNeill and that her husband would be down in a few minutes. It was very nice to meet Mr. Murray Caine, his line was cetaceans, wasn't it? She had read a most stimulating article of his on porpoises published some months ago.

Since he had only telephoned her husband the day before, he thought that this indicated some pretty quick action on her part, rushing around to a library and looking him up. He didn't for a minute believe that Mrs. McNeill had happened to read that magazine

article eight months ago and had remembered it. But it is very gratifying to have people make some effort to read what one has written, and it was gracious of her to say that his article was "stimulating" rather than "interesting." So in the first two minutes he was mowed down flat by Anne McNeill.

He was, of course, not aware that that was what usually happened to men meeting her.

She had him sit in a comfortable deep chair, gave him cigarettes, and eased him gently into a conversation about Cape Hatteras and its geographical formation and its people. A stout Irish maid, puffing a little but not with indignation, brought in a tea tray with the usual equipment. Ordinarily Murray Caine scorned tea, but this was not the usual pale, emasculated stuff, for Mrs. McNeil added enough Puerto Rican rum to satisfy even Long John Silver. There was a thick round of lemon, too, and plenty of sugar; also well-frosted little chocolate cakes accompanied the tea.

Murray Caine ate and drank and relaxed and was very grateful to Marshall for having told him about the McNeills.

From upstairs came the sounds of a baby crying and of a small boy singing, "Mrs. Bond, she went down to the po—ond in a rage," repeating that simple line over and over.

Then Jeffrey McNeill came down into the living room. He was tall and thin and had a quality of authoritative distinction which caused the young hospital nurses to think him "absolutely wonderful," to speculate as to the possibility of his having Spanish ancestors, which he had not, and to fall in love with him in

inconvenient droves. He was in the middle thirties, his face growing lined, his black hair, to his annoyance, becoming romantically gray behind the ears. He would not, Caine thought, be a good person to have as an antagonist. It would be much, much wiser and more comfortable to have him on one's own side.

But he was agreeable and courteous. He shook hands with Caine, said he was glad to see him, and accepted tea, a plate, and cake from Anne.

"Now, what seems to be bothering you?" he asked, and sat down on the sofa.

Caine said, "Well, the point is, Dr. McNeill, I have a friend—as a matter of fact, she's my fiancée—and she hears footsteps following her all the time. I wondered if you would be willing to see her and get to the bottom of what seems to be troubling her."

McNeill stirred his tea. He said, "It wouldn't be hard to put a man on and find out who is following her, Mr. Caine."

Anne was watching him. She said, "There's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, there is," he said. "She doesn't think anyone actually is there at all. She can't see anyone or anything. She just hears these damn footsteps going step, step, click, wherever she goes, and they've got her to where she shivers like a hummingbird's wings when she thinks about it. Dr. McNeill, sir, I'm right worried. The poor little honey thinks she's going insane, and I tell her that of course she isn't, but actually I don't know. Is it possible—my God, I hope it's not possible that she *is*?"

"Is what?" McNeill asked.

"Is going insane."

"You think she's having auditory hallucinations?" McNeill asked.

"I guess that's what you call them, sir."

"Of course I can't diagnose from this distance, but they sometimes do indicate a serious condition."

"My God!" Murray Caine was stricken.

"Could it be possible that any actual person was following her?" Anne McNeill asked.

"Well, ma'am, you know it seems to me it might be so, not everywhere, of course, not in the museum, because I would certainly have seen him there, and not in my club, because he didn't go to my college, although I did come here up North because my daddy wanted me to be broad-minded about Yankees. I believe this human error went to Yale, although he only lasted out eighteen months, having the habit of never finishing anything, and they very sensibly kicked him out. But it is just possible that he might have been gumshoeing around after Joan and got her all worked up until she thinks she hears him everywhere. He's a cousin who was brought up in their family, but I think he's got cuckoo or changeling blood in him, and he has the damndest degraded sense of humor you ever knew."

Jeffrey McNeill drank his tea. Then he said, "Who is your fiancée?"

"Joan Rolet, sir. She's a right wonderful pretty little girl, though I just call her little because it's a term of endearment. She's nearly as tall as I am."

"The girl who does those very excellent heads?" Anne McNeill said with enthusiastic recognition.

And her husband at the same time said, "Judge Joseph Rolet's daughter?"

"That's right," Murray answered them both.

"Who is the man who might be following her?" McNeill asked.

"Her cousin Fritz Rolet."

"What is their relationship, not actual," Anne asked, "but emotional, if any?"

"Oh, he's in love with her, certainly, and jealous of me, I suppose. He is really an undesirable character, Mrs. McNeill," and he told the story of the half a cat.

The McNeills exchanged a glance but made no comment. Jeffrey put his cup down on a table and took out a pipe. Filling it, he said, "How long have these steps been bothering her?"

"For about three weeks. I asked her and she said they'd been around after her since a rainy week in August, since the time her father had a stroke. I guess it's only a slight one. The family have been at their summer home in Claesburg on the Hudson."

"Claesburg?" Jeffrey McNeill was thinking. He said, "What's that near?"

"Not far from Poughkeepsie," Caine answered.

"Near Millersville," Anne added. She was watching her husband.

"About three weeks ago," he said, working over the lighting of his pipe. "What was it that happened in that part of the country about three weeks ago, Anne?"

She said without emphasis, as if it were a matter of only very slight interest, "Darling, an unidentified body turned up in the river."

"Yes, I remember, vaguely. Man or woman?"

"Woman, I think. No, a man. I don't remember."

Murray Caine was feeling frightened. He said, "Well, but a stray old body in the river like that couldn't

possibly have anything to do with Joan's hearing footsteps."

"No, certainly not," Anne answered, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that she said that to reassure him and make him happier, almost as European mothers during the war must so often have said to their children, "Darling, don't be frightened, the planes are nowhere near us. They won't bomb us tonight."

And how many thousands and thousands of times the bombs had dropped!

Caine glanced at the surrealistic portrait and felt now definitely that he had come to the wrong people. They were consultants in crime detection, that was their business, and of course they saw crime in everything, that was their line, crime. Just as a barber looks at your haircut, finding something wrong with it, and a tailor at your clothes and a shoe manufacturer at your shoes, so the McNeills looked at you for evidences of murder or something like it.

"Look, Dr. and Mrs. McNeill," he said nervously, and put his tea-things down rather awkwardly on a glasstopped table, "perhaps now you don't want to fuss with this situation, perhaps it's not actually up your alley at all. It may be a matter for a psychoanalyst."

"I'm no psychoanalyst," McNeill said shortly. "I am a surgeon."

"I know, I know, sir. But I have a friend who said you and Mrs. McNeill were the ones to come to in a situation dealing with anything mysterious, so I thought perhaps you might help Joan."

"I'd like to try to help her," Mrs. McNeill said, and Murray looked at her and thought that perhaps he had come to the right place. After all, he didn't believe

anyone could deal with this as well as she could. Nobody else would have her kindness and wisdom and understanding.

He said, "Of course it would be on a purely business footing, you know," and he said this awkwardly, because he was still young enough to feel embarrassed at the mention of money and payments with people who seemed so much older than himself and so much wealthier and better established. He didn't realize that even the apparently wealthy and solidly established have difficulty sometimes in meeting their bills.

"Well, we'd see about that later," McNeill said, with surprising tolerance.

"No, no, sir, I insist now—it would have to be on a solid financial footing—I mean, I can afford it, afford any reasonable fee, I mean. My old grandpa left me five thousand dollars and I was going to buy a small sloop with it and cruise with Joan and observe porpoises on our wedding trip, but golly, if she has anything serious the matter with her, boats don't mean anything to me at all."

Both of the McNeills smiled sympathetically at that outburst, and he felt, suddenly, reassured and happier.

Jeffrey took his pipe out of his mouth and said, "We sail too. We'd be glad to do what we can for Joan, but will she come and talk to us herself? We can't do anything without her co-operation."

"I think she will," Murray answered. "I think she's good and scared. And I tell you the truth, Dr. McNeill, I am too. She says she knows that when these footsteps catch up with her, whatever the thing is that's following her is going to kill her. Well, I discount that more or less because of nerves, but what I don't discount is

that she says she won't marry me because she thinks it's some form of insanity and she isn't willing to pass that on to any children—but surely there's no chance of that, is there, Dr. McNeill?"

"I couldn't make a long-distance diagnosis," the doctor answered.

This evasion cast poor Murray into panic again. He said miserably, "If there's anything serious like that the matter with Joan, why, as far as I'm concerned the sun will be just a slice of old yellow turnip hung up in the sky."

A small boy of about six came down the stairs and into the living room. He was an engaging child, fair-haired, with a face which when he grew up would be very like Jeffrey McNeill's.

Anne introduced him to Murray Caine and the boy shook hands politely, with a good grip, but he was obviously little interested in Caine because of some urgent matter, although the chocolate-covered cakes diverted him.

"Yes, you may have one, Michael," his mother said.

With his mouth very full, he said, "I think the baby ought to have some. He gets dreadfully bored with just milk and now he won't take his bottle from that nurse at all. He yells and spits it out of his mouth and I don't blame him. He can't stand her, Mother. She talks to him in such a silly way. She's never going to be able to feed that baby."

Anne said, "Why don't you ask the nurse, then, if you can give him the bottle?"

"Well, I might, if she'd let me," he answered, and finished the cake. "He'll do anything for me." He said this with pardonable pride and looked at Murray Caine

to see if he was impressed, which he was. "It's our new baby," Michael announced with even more pride. "His name is Martin and the minute he can hold a ball I'm going to teach him to play baseball."

"A sound scheme," Murray said. "The thing is to start them young, Michael." He got up then and said, "I won't keep you any longer, Mrs. McNeill. When can I bring Joan over to see you, Doctor?"

The McNeills had risen and Jeffrey was emptying the ashes of his pipe in the fireplace. He said, "I'll let you know. I'm not quite sure of my engagements. Sometime toward the end of next week, I imagine."

Murray felt uneasy. He said, "I don't want to hurry you, sir, but I don't think there's any time to be lost. What if those doggoned footsteps catch up with her between now and the end of next week? Maybe whatever it is really will kill her."

Jeffrey McNeill said, "I doubt it. I'll see her as soon as I can, Mr. Caine."

They went to the door. The baby was yelling up stairs, and as Murray expressed his thanks and said good-by the little fair-haired boy turned and went tearing up, saying, "He simply *hates* that nurse."

The McNeills watched Murray Caine going down their walk. The doctor bent his head and kissed his wife on the lips.

She said, "Darling, what do you make of that tale?"

"Not much, yet. I've been wondering just who it is she thinks has sufficient reason to want to kill her."

"Do you think that cousin is behind it all?"

"I don't know. But I do know that three apparently unrelated episodes occurred in Claesburg three weeks ago: Judge Rolet had a stroke, disembodied

footsteps took to following his daughter, and an unidentified body was found in the river."

"Yes, but I don't see that the body has the slightest connection with the Rolets."

"Nor I, to tell the truth, but I thought you might go over there tomorrow and look over the ground, if you don't mind. See what you can find out about the whole matter."

"Do you think the girl is in danger, Jeffrey?"

"I don't know. It may be an indication of schizophrenia. Auditory hallucinations are graver than visual. It shows an anxiety state which is serious, and it's never wise to waste time or to minimize any situation like this. Can you leave the baby?"

"I suppose so. I suppose that if he won't eat for the nurse he will for Michael or Mary, and the nurse does take excellent care of him."

"At three months Martin is quite a personality," Jeffrey said, amused.

Anne went into the living room and took the tea tray into the kitchen, where the cook Mary grumbled about the nurse's attitude toward the baby. Anne let the Celtic complaints slide off the surface of her mind. She was thinking of the trip to Claesburg, of the condition of her car's tires and battery, of the clothes she would take, of where she could stay there, and just what in her investigations of the Rolet family she would find.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anne McNeill arrived in Claesburg, therefore, the next day, a hot Sunday afternoon in early September. The crickets were wildly vocal in the fields, there was a smell of dust and goldenrod in the air and a glimpse, from the front windows of her room through the trees and far downhill in the distance, of the Hudson River lying still and blue in the sun.

She had driven across country and had come into the town by way of Old Barn Road which had crossed a bridge over an active small river. And Claesburg had impressed her as being a charming little town, not in the business section, which was like business sections all over the country, but the roads were quiet and tree-shaded and the houses were not a dull conglomeration of magnified bird residences so usual in places of this sort. There were a few very early Dutch houses of red brick, and a good many white colonial ones with fine lines, and several that were interesting American Gothic with perpendicular boarding and peaked gables, and there were, also, set far back

among lawns and trees and ornamental planting, the tall mansard-roof "mansions" so characteristic at one time, of the Hudson Valley. From her room in the Country Club. Anne could see the tower room and upper windows of one such house, but this seemed in bad condition, for some of the shutters were hanging by one hinge and the iron railing was broken on the roof of the tower room.

The Country Club itself was modern of the moderns, small but possessing a blue swimming pool surrounded by striped umbrellas and glass tables and white chairs; and there were borders gay with petunias and geraniums, and four excellent tennis courts beyond the pool. Young people in white were playing tennis and three small boys in red bathing trunks were trying, with shouts, to ride a yellow rubber horse in the pool. The afternoon was filled with color and sunlight and a pleasant sense of relaxation.

Anne McNeill put on a dress the color of the pool, to add to the picture, and went out to the terrace where she sat drinking ice tea and eating small sandwiches, watching the little boys and wishing that her own Michael were having the fun of trying to ride the rubber horse. She was, she found, a little tired and she would not question anybody tonight or go anywhere. It was always unwise to force things, although Jeffrey forged ahead at a furious pace in investigations. Her tempo was slower and she was inclined to let matters develop more naturally, more easily.

Players were coming toward the clubhouse from the tennis courts: an older, attractive couple, four fifteen-year-old girls, and another four, three men and a thin, engaging girl in white shorts. The fair-haired

boy walking beside her was like her, apparently her brother. There was a tall, cadaverous, untidy man who seemed nervous and not too well, and the fourth was Murray Caine, sunburned and full of vitality, looking like the sort of man whom, Anne thought, if one were considerably younger and not married to Jeffrey McNeill, one might like to be marrying oneself.

She went in and upstairs before they reached the terrace, and they sat at a table below her window from which, as she sat to write some letters, she could hear their voices. She gathered that it was Fritz Rolet who was making the high, petulant demand for drinks, for something "long and cool and amber-colored with ice divinely clinking against the frosted glass." Murray Caine brusquely said he would order rum punch and the tall boy said he was going to swim and when he came out would get his own coke.

For a time then the voices beneath the window became less distinct. Glancing out of the window again, Anne could see Joan sitting in the white chair watching the pool and holding her tall glass. The men were under the striped umbrella. She could see the lower part of Fritz Rolet's legs and his feet in dirty white sneakers.

Ten minutes or so passed while Anne wrote her letters, and when she glanced out again the white sneakers had gone and Murray Caine had moved his chair near Joan's. She could see them both now. He was leaning toward her, and his voice floated up quite clearly, saying in a troubled way, "But look, honey, I wish you hadn't changed your mind about this. I think it's right important that you see this man like you said you would."

"Darling, please," Joan said. "It isn't necessary. I got myself all wrought up over a molehill."

He said, "I don't think you're the kind of girl that does that. I think it's a family policy."

"What is, Murray?"

"To make molehills out of mountains."

"You mean——Oh no, we don't, Murray."

"I think you do just that, honey. I think you all have some sort of a Van Doon or a Rolet tradition that it's a sign of right bad breeding to make a fuss about anything."

Joan laughed a little.

"But sometimes the right thing to do is to get out in the road and make a big fuss and scream and wave your arms and kick up a lot of dust."

"I don't think I would be apt to do that."

"That's what I say, and you wouldn't do it because —now, honey, I'm going to insult you and call you a name no girl nowadays can bear having put to her, and that is that you're a lady."

"Murray, you're a funny darling."

"I know; when you're born in the South you're old-fashioned about women. Well, as I was saying, your family has got many policies as the Mutual Life Insurance Company, and most of them are just as solid, but this policy of understating your troubles all the time can lead you into worse trouble, and I think you're making a mistake——"

What the mistake was Anne McNeill did not hear, because someone downstairs was beginning to play the piano. It was nothing she had ever heard before, a little reminiscent perhaps of other pastoral sketches, a faint blend of Percy Grainger, German, and Mac-

Dowell, and also Prokofieff and originality. The theme was idyllic and charming, although the composition, as it developed, was more program-music stuff than Anne liked because she preferred the patterns of the great composers who have mingled mathematics and emotion so gloriously.

She thought, "I'll go down and see who is playing," but when she came into the large room of the club she wished she had not, because there was Fritz Rolet at the piano, surrounded by the four fifteen-year-old girl tennis players Anne had seen earlier in the afternoon. However, not wishing to duck out again quickly, Anne crossed to a table, pretending to be hunting for a particular magazine.

Fritz had stopped, and the girls, leaning on the piano, were chirping with enthusiasm, saying it was marvelous, it was simply wonderful, please wouldn't he do that part again where the cow blunders into the nymphs' and shepherds' picnic, or no, finish it first, they were wild to hear the part where the nymph drowned the poor shepherd that she loved.

"But the trouble is," he was saying, intensely enjoying his audience, "I don't *know* the end. I can't get it. I can't stem to finish it to save my life."

"But you simply *must* finish it, Mr. Rolet!" This in chorus.

"Of course I must. It's absolutely essential that I finish it *immediately* because I have a friend who thinks the Philharmonic will take it for their next season. But the trouble is I can't feel the end of it—I suppose the basic reason is that I myself have never experienced deep grief, have never known what it is to go through death with somebody I loved deeply.

Obviously I shall have to do that before I can capture the essence of it and pour it out into music." He flung his head, stretching back as if he were swinging, and crashed into staccato chords which must have been, Anne thought as she went up the stairs, the part where the cow bungled into the picnic.

"There is something curiously out of date about that young man," she thought. It was as if his unwholesome exoticism were old and musty, not quite going back to Oscar Wilde, but possibly to the beginning of the twentieth century. And she thought of people who had been born in an age to which their personality was badly adjusted. She had had a history teacher in college who belonged in the twelfth century, and Benjamin Franklin and Leonardo da Vinci were surely twentieth-century souls. And this Fritz Rolet, she thought, would have been in his element in those years when people were so exercised about expressing themselves and enduring all of life's varied experiences for the sake of their Art.

For a while longer as she sat in her room the music went on and on, but there always came a certain point at which it would stop and exasperation be indicated by annoyed chords or impatient treble twiddlings.

Outside, Joan and Murray Caine had disappeared, and out in the pool the boy Tom was alone, diving and swimming, an amusing, tall and very bony figure. Then the music stopped, the boy climbed, dripping, out of the pool, and some half hour later a party of eight men and women in the middle thirties came out onto the terrace for cocktails, laughing and talking.

The steward came up with a note for Anne.

It said:

DEAR MRS. MCNEILL,

There's the devil to pay now. Joan won't go to a doctor after all. She says she's better and it's all nonsense, but I don't think it is nonsense. I'm downright worried about her, although I don't think she has schizophrenia or anything like that, but I am worried and I'm going to get her to consult your husband if I have to drag her.

I saw your name on the register, so I suppose you are here looking into the situation.

Worse luck I have to go back to the city tonight and I am frightfully sorry I dragged you over here for nothing. What in hell, excuse me, can we do now?

Yours,
MURRAY CAINE

She thought, "My glory, the boy mustn't drag her to us; it would ruin all our chances of helping her." and she sat and wondered what could be done. It looked as if she and Jeffrey were out of the case before even they had been in it. She would have to give up her room and drive home.

However, since she was tired she decided to spend the night here, so she went downstairs and had an excellent dinner of lobster and white wine and salad. During the first course she heard the distant whistle of an engine on the New York Central and the waitress told her that that was the train to New York. All the men who came up for the week ends were taking that train down. And Murray Caine, too, Anne thought, was sitting now in one of the green plush seats looking out at the pink sunset clouds over the

river and worrying about Joan, wondering what Fritz was saying to her, wondering if the footsteps were coming nearer. If they had caught up to her yet.

The poor boy must be in torment, having to leave a situation like this.

It was a lovely evening, with a soft dusk full of the voices of crickets and a katydid or two and the wandering lights of fireflies.

Anne walked along the road from the club toward the house whose tower she had seen from her room, the house with the shutters of the upper windows hanging by one hinge. As she went she too heard footsteps behind her, and for a moment she was nervous, although with a tempering of humor, wondering if Joan Rolet's malady were contagious. But as she turned and looked back she saw Joan herself and the cousin Fritz walking along rapidly. The girl wore a silvery blue silk dress, lovely in the twilight. She smiled a little at Anne, but the cousin glowered as if not pleased at seeing a stranger on a road he seemed to consider his own.

He was saying, "Yes, that story of Abraham and Isaac has great appeal for me."

And the two walked on, hurrying.

But it was getting late and there were mosquitoes, so Anne went back.

A full moon was rising over the fields and there was the most delicious, cool smell of sweet fern coming from somewhere beyond a stone wall.

She went back to the club, sat downstairs looking at magazines for perhaps twenty minutes, and then went upstairs to her room. She crossed it without turning on the light and stood for a few minutes looking

out at the moon and the dark gray fields and black line of woods beyond. She thought she saw a light flick on and off high among the trees in the direction of the old abandoned house, and then, deciding that she had seen a firefly in the foreground, she turned on her lights, pulled down the shades, undressed and read awhile, most comfortably, in bed. She turned the table lamp out early and went to sleep.

Perhaps it would have been better is she had not slept quite so soundly. Even as she did she was dimly aware that this Claesburg was not as quiet a town at night as she would have expected. There seemed to be a good many voices now and then out in front of the club, and cars coming and going, and a feeling, through her sleep, of excitement. Once she woke up and listened, but just then no one was about, although she heard a telephone ringing and wondered if it could be Jeffrey trying to get her, saying that some dreadful thing had happened to one of the boys. But that was pure foolishness, she told herself, and went to the window. The weather seemed to have changed and become cold and windy. She thought she saw lights moving in the woods over beyond the Rolet place, in the opposite direction from which she had walked after dinner. She couldn't imagine why lights should be there at this time of night—three o'clock in the morning. But after all, it was not her concern, so she went back to bed and to sleep again.

It was six when a loud knocking on her door awakened her. She sat up, sleepily reached down to the foot of the bed and got hold of her blue silk bathrobe. "Who is it?" she asked, pulling the robe over her shoulders and smoothing back her hair.

"Murray Caine. Please, Mrs. McNeill, it's frightfully urgent." His voice was that of a man in desperate anxiety.

She thought, "Something dreadfully serious has happened," and called, "Come in. The door's not locked. I'm not up yet," and then, as he did come in, "What's the matter, Murray? Sit down."

He stood gripping the edge of the small table by her bed, leaning over it a little as if the floor were swaying in a heavy sea, and yet he was certainly not drunk.

He said, "Mrs. McNeill, did you know that Joan has disappeared?"

She asked, "When did she disappear?"

"Sometime last night around nine. She went out of the kitchen to get something out of the car from the stable. They use the old stable as a garage, and she never came in again. At first the family thought she had gone up the back stairs to her room or to her studio, but then when they began looking for her she wasn't in the house anywhere."

"How about the garage?" Anne asked. "Could she have been there—hurt?"

"She's not in the garage, Mrs. McNeill. I went all through it myself."

"I thought you'd gone back to New York."

"I did. I got there at eleven, and they telephoned me at midnight and I got a plane and flew back here. The Rolets are nearly frantic, ma'am. The local people have been hunting the woods all night, and now we're getting the state police on it, and I wish you'd get your husband over and see what you and he can

do. Somehow I have more confidence in you two than in all the state police."

"That's kind of you," Anne said. "Please sit down a minute."

He sat tentatively on the end of a chaise longue twisting his hands together. He looked twenty years older than he had the day before.

He said, "Look, Mrs. McNeill, do you think those damn steps have caught up with her at last? Or perhaps she did go out of her head and go off somewhere and—and commit suicide."

"You say she went out to the garage last night at about nine?"

"Yes, she did."

"Who saw her?"

"Fritz, and the cook Cora."

"I see. That must have been after she came back from the walk then."

"It was. Fritz says then came back about eight-thirty or so and they went into the kitchen to get a coke and sat around talking and eating gingerbread and then she remembered she'd left some letters in the car and he offered to get them for her but she said no, she would rather go out herself, so she took a flashlight and went out—and the cook saw her, but she also thinks she saw the flashlight going off across the back field, sort of dancing, she says."

Anne said, "I saw Joan and her cousin walking at about half-past seven or quarter of eight, perhaps. They passed me, going rather quickly on that road, I don't know its name, but it seems to lead to the old house with the tower room among high pine trees."

"Dark Hill, the old Aldrich place," Caine said. "But you see, they came home after that walk. Will you take this on, Mrs. McNeill?"

She answered, "I think you'd have to tell the Judge you would like to consult my husband about it. We can't very well just slide into the situation as amateur adjuncts to the state police. If Judge Rolet wants us to help, we'll be glad to do what we can."

"Well, my God, he is certainly one badly worried old man and he's bound to want all the help he can get. I'll go and talk with him and call you again."

He went off and she got up and dressed. It was half-past six when she went downstairs into the club entrance hall to telephone. But there was very bad service and the operator reported all the lines across to Connecticut busy. She spent a full forty minutes fruitlessly trying to reach her own house and finally went out into the dining room and kitchen to see if she could get some coffee. The club steward and the colored cook were in the kitchen sitting at a white oilclothed table having a little early breakfast. They rose quickly, seeing Anne, and said that certainly they could get her something to eat, right away, ma'am—had she heard the news, wasn't it just about as bad as it could be now—Miss Joan disappeared; why, she was playing tennis and drinking rum punch right out there on the terrace yesterday afternoon, and now who could tell what had happened to her. It looked as if one of those bad characters the Judge had had to sentence to prison in New York at one time or another had broke loose and come up here and murdered Miss Joan to get even with the Judge. It was an awful thing,

but it looked as if the state police would find her body in the woods sometime before long now. They were listening to hear the fire bell because the chief said he'd ring it the minute she was found alive or dead. He'd been out hunting in the woods all night with all his boys, and it was his theory that some bad character——

Anne, agreeing courteously, said, "Yes, I'm afraid it seems a plausible theory. I'll try once more to put a telephone message through and then perhaps you'll bring me my breakfast."

She got her line through and found, to her disappointment, that Jeffrey had been called off early to the hospital for an emergency operation, but it was heartwarming to have the cook Mary's Irish voice saying," Sure the boys is fine, ma'am, but the baby did be waking at two and yelling his head off until Michael and I had to be giving him a bottle, although that nurse was stubborn set against it, but Dr. McNeill said if the baby was that hungry he deserved a little satisfaction. You got to treat babies like humans, Mrs. McNeill, ma'am."

"You do, Mary," Anne agreed, "but after all, we have to remember that the nurse doesn't have quite the same ideas that we do."

"She's a fool, that wan, dressed up as she is in a uniform like a salteen cracker. Are ye through your wild wolf hunt yet, Mrs. McNeill?"

"No yet, Mary. Not even begun it."

"Ah, it's bad, is it? I hear it in yeh voice."

"Yes, I'm afraid it's bad. A young girl has disappeared here."

"I know, I know. I dreamed it last night. I dreamed that a black-haired fella cut the red heart out of her and was after sellin' it to the butcher."

Anne said, "Mary, you've been worrying too much about the meat shortage. If you can reach Dr. McNeill, please tell him that I'm anxious to get hold of him. And give my love to the boys."

She returned to the dining room then, and the steward brought a paper and her breakfast. She thought that at any minute she should be hearing from Murray Caine about Judge Rolet, but no word came from him and it was maddening to sit here eating bacon and eggs and drinking excellent coffee, wondering and wondering about Joan.

She finished breakfast and went into the reading room and sat there looking at the paper and at old *New Yorkers,* and for once the humor in the *New Yorkers* seemed not humor at all, but a beautiful, thin blade of steel satire that the stupid confused with humor; and still no telephone message came. Outside the day was overcast, chilly, and windy. She sat there waiting for an hour and a half. It made one too nervous, this listening for bells; the telephone bell at the desk in the hall, and the clang of the fire bell in the village. But finally the telephone did ring, and the steward, hurrying, said, "There's a call for Mrs. McNeill from Mr. Murray Caine."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The afternoon before Joan had driven Murray Caine down to the train and kissed him and stood on the platform waving to him, thinking what a dear he was and what an amusing husband he would make and what fun it would be to follow out his scheme of using his grandfather's legacy for a small boat and going off on long, long cruises in it. By that time she would surely be all cured of this silly malady of the footsteps since it was better already and, anyway, she doubted if they could follow her into a boat. They seemed to be influenced by water. They didn't like it. Perhaps it was a great cat, or a panther, and that might account for the small click as of nails accompanying the step. But if she began to think about them they would come again. She watched the end of the train swinging away down the Hudson, heard the whistle as it approached the grade crossing, and then turned away and went quickly to her car.

Supper at the Rolets' on Sunday night was a help-

yourself affair of baked beans, salad, stewed peaches, and chocolate cake all out on the sideboard, for Cora was never on duty at this meal. Tonight she happened to be in the house, having a headache, but she was not officially in evidence.

The Judge ate sparingly and retired with Mrs. Rolet to his study to listen to the Quizz Kids on the radio, a program which they both, rather incongruously, enjoyed and never would miss.

Joan washed the dishes in the pantry, helped by Tom and watched by Fritz, who was in a gloomy mood.

Tom announced that he was going to the movies.

"But, my dear owl," his sister said, "you know very well The Court doesn't like us to go on Sundays. He thinks it doesn't look well."

The Rolet children were apt to call their father, affectionately, "Justice," or "The Court."

"Now look, Joan," Tom answered, his voice cracking. "I don't ordinarily believe in subterfuge and under hand dealings and so on, but sometimes a person has to make his own decisions and I'm old enough to do it once in a while. It's just *Going My Way* that's being shown, and gosh, I've never seen it, Joan. I was at school or had measles or something every time there was a chance before and I've never seen it! And it's practically going to church to see that film, anyway. Gosh, I'll tell the The Court where I've been if he asks me. You know a guy can't always be kept down flat under his parents' thumbs. It's the worst thing in the world for the independent development of the individual to be stultified like that. It fairly cripples

you emotionally." His voice was so very unsteady that she saw he was nearly in tears, and it was true that when you are sixteen you have to begin to defy your parents, even the wisest and best of them, or you will indeed be emotionally crippled.

She said, "Okay," and asked him if he had enough money, and he said that she was absolutely solid as a sister and went loping out for his bicycle.

During this dialogue Fritz had been in the dining room glumly eating the grapes off a bunch in the silver fruit dish, a trick which Joan and her mother deplored but restrained themselves from condemning. After Tom rushed off, Fritz came into the pantry and rinsed his fingers at the faucet, flicking the drops away.

"What's the matter, Fritz?" Joan asked. She hung up her dish towels.

"Nothing, nothing at all," he answered crossly. "I'm going up to work on the dirge. I've simply got to capture the spirit of its end. It eludes me until I'm utterly mad, stark staring mad."

He was always ill-tempered and difficult after Murray Caine had been with them, consumed, Joan realized, with jealousy, and it was a great pity, poor Fritzi, but what could one do?

She turned out the lights in the pantry and dining room and went on upstairs. Sounds of the Quiz Kids came from the study, and her father's deep, genial laugh.

She was upstairs in her own studio, looking out of the window at the last of the sunset on the river, when she heard footsteps behind her and turned, filled with

a terrified discouragement, for she had thought that she was all over that.

However, this time they were real, for Fritz was there looking at her with one of his most morose expressions. He leaned against the doorjamb and said, "Cheerful little liar, Tom is. I wonder he told you all that stuff when I was right there in the dining room."

"What stuff?" she asked anxiously.

"All that about going to the movies. That was just a blind. What he is actually going to do tonight is to go to the Dark Hill house and break in and explore it. He told me this morning, said he had always been crazy to and now he just had to do it to get some background he wanted for his serial narrative. It seems his hero has returned from the republic of the porpoises and is about to take over a great abandoned mansion on the Hudson."

Joan said, "But he mustn't do it! It will be breaking and entering. Father has explained that. The boy is crazy!"

"I know. I tried to dissuade him, but he never listens to me. I think he hates me."

"Fritz, don't be silly. We'll have to go and get him back at once. We'll drive over——"

"Better to walk, I should say. We don't want to attract any attention driving up over there. I know where the iron fence is broken and we can slip through it and go through the back garden and that tangle of lilacs and stuff and get him."

"All right, let's hurry."

So they hurried, and that is why they passed Anne on the road.

And that is why, shortly after eight, Joan was standing in the drawing room of the Dark Hill house, calling, "T—hooo-hoooo—oooommmm—ooommmm *Ro*-let." Echoes called wanly down to her from upstairs; and from the ceiling above, where plaster had fallen down onto the rotting carpet, there was a sound of the scurrying of a rat.

It was a great square room, cold and musty, shuttered and almost dark now. You could smell and feel but not see the extent of the dilapidation, though the old overstuffed chairs and sofas seemed huge, ragged, ailing animals, and a little light coming throught the shutters showed the chandelier.

To Joan it was a defiant sort of desecration, and infuriating, too, to have Fritz cross the room to the piano, open it, flick the keyboard with a handkerchief, and sit down and begin to play that part of his Shepherd's Dirge where it approached the unfinished end. The piano, a Steinway grand, was now grotesquely out of tune, jangling and strident with many of the strings broken. It gave forth a caricature of Fritz's dirge, a madness of sound. He paid no attention to her when she called to him saying that they mustn't linger on here. They must either find Tom at once or go home. Ignoring her, he sat there banging out his chords and crescendos, banging, angrily, even the pastoral passages, coming to the point beyond which he had not carried on his composition, breaking off there, cursing under his breath, and starting on again. Then, suddenly, he stopped, got up, and strode over to

her, saying, "No, it's no good. I can't get it this way. I hoped I could. Come on upstairs," and he grabbed her wrist.

"But why?" she asked. "Why go upstairs? Certainly if Tom is here he would have heard me call him, or have heard you playing."

He answered roughly, "I've always wanted to explore here," and he took a flashlight from his pocket and played a path of light up the stairs.

They were hardwood, covered with thick dust, and at one place the banister at the right had broken and fallen away.

He held her wrist tightly and pulled her behind him. Frightened and hating this, but not wanting to create an emotional crisis by opposing him, she tried to bring the situation down to a normal level by saying, Why does the Abraham and Isaac story appeal to you? You didn't tell me."

"The sacrifice theme," he answered. "Abraham sacrificing the creature who was his very heart's blood. But I never believed in the ram. The ram in the bushes was the first example of the spurious Happy Ending."

"Still," she said, and tried to speak lightly and be amused, "it must have been there, because Isaac grew up and begat Esau and Jacob when he was nearly threescore years old. So the ram must have been true."

He didn't answer this. He said, "Come on," and pulled her along the hall of the first floor toward the front of the house and, still clutching her, went through an open door into a bedroom.

And she, remembering why they were here, stood

in the center of the room and shouted, "Tom—Tom Rolet——"

There was no answer.

"Where is he? Where can he possibly be?" she asked Fritz, who was doing something at the bedroom door. He held the torch, and the light centered on the keyhole. He was removing the key.

"Tom is at the movies, of course," he answered, "piously reveling in *Going My Way*, as he said he would."

"Fritz!" She could scarcely see his face now. "Fritz, what have you done? Why have you brought me here to this house?"

It was very nearly dark now. A little gray light came in one window where a shutter was sagging. The light of the torch moved away from the door and slid inquisitively about the room, on the poppy wallpaper stained where water had leaked in, on the bird's-eye-maple furniture with the veneer all blistered and raised and breaking, on the brass bed made up with a counterpane dusty, chewed and stained by rats or squirrels. A *Ladies' Home Journal* for May 1906 was on the bed table, where years ago a vase had been overturned, its water spilled and the flowers strewn on the table and the floor. Their withered remains were still there. And there was a half-finished letter on the little desk across the room.

It was from here that Mrs. Aldrich had gone downstairs and hung herself from the crystal chandelier in the drawing room.

"Fritz," Joan said, and forced her voice to be free of emphasis of fright or anger. "This is a very silly

proceeding on your part. Just what is it all about?" She leaned against the foot of the brass bed and he sat down sideways in the desk chair, spraying the floor with light. There was a carpet with big faded dusty roses, and squirrels had dragged in nuts and scattered them all about.

The man was a lank, dark figure as he sat there. He said, as if he were very tired, "Really, Joan, you are superb, you know. Why don't you scream and rant around, darling, as ninety-nine women out of a hundred would?"

This was the way to deal with this situation, she saw, to keep it casual, if that were within human possibility.

She said, "Why should I scream? There's nothing to scream about. You are simply being very foolish. Let's go home."

"We? Darling, you are under a misapprehension. You at least are not going home until you give me your word of honor, or sign a little paper, that you will not marry Murray Caine. This project is entirely for your own good, Joan. It is simply to save you from making the mistake of your life."

She even made herself laugh a little, saying, "You are choosing an odd and rather extreme way of doing that, Fritz. What do you think Father will say to this performance of yours?"

"He won't know. You'll never tell him because you'll be so afraid he will have a second stroke. Three and they're out, you know. Jehovah, the great baseball umpire, calls the strikes. That's not bad, is it, by the way?"

Her face tightened another notch or two. She said, "Do you think Father will let me just disappear like this? My dear Fritz, he'll have the state police out in no time and they'll find me, and kidnaping in these days is punished by the death sentence."

He said, "Oh yes, and do I see you giving this story to the newspapers: 'Eminent Judge's daughter kidnaped by cousin and incarcerated in empty house.' Darling, a story like that would break your father professionally and you know it, and there's not a point on which you can get me without wrecking the family's sacred reputation, so I am absolutely safe." He laughed and snapped out the flashlight and they were there in darkness.

She said, "And how long do you intend to keep me here?"

"Until you promise me that you won't marry Caine. It will be your giving me parole for life, and I know that the Rolet word is to be trusted even unto the death." He said this mockingly.

She made no comment to that. "What about food?" she asked.

"Oh, you won't need much; actually the less you have the more quickly you will reach a decision—like Von Moltke's theory that a brutal war is in reality the kindest because it's over sooner."

They were still in the dark.

And now she was really terrified, thinking of the times innumerable they had all said, "You never can tell about Fritz. You never know what he will do next," and her control slipped and she ran for the door, but it was locked, of course, and before she had shaken

it and pounded it more than a few times he was across the room, with his hand gripping her shoulder, his long thin fingers digging into her. She knew she had made a mistake. It was dangerous. This hot and confused fear and anger and emotion held peril. And just at that moment she heard, or thought she heard outside the door, in the hallway, the sound of footsteps.

"Fritz!" she said. "Fritz, someone is coming."

"What do you mean?" He spoke quickly and his breath was hot against her cheek. She felt that now he was frightened.

"Listen. I heard someone."

"Nonsense. You imagined it."

"No, someone walking in the hallway."

For once she was glad of the diversion the footsteps created.

Fritz was still beside her, his hand on her shoulder but no longer gripping her. It slid down her arm and he drew her to him so tightly that she felt his heart beating, thudding far faster than normal, and she remembered that it was because of a slight heart condition that he had not been able to get into the service during the war, or at least they had all thought it was slight, but perhaps it had been serious.

She said, "Fritz, we really should go home. I think you heart is overacting."

He pushed her away from her, saying angrily, "My God, can I never escape from my own limitations? Anyway, I never believed those fool tales that Kitty Aldrich walked."

He turned away from her and went across the room and jerked a closet door open. She sat on the

edge of the bed again while he played the flashlight on rows of hanging dresses.

"Kitty Aldrich's!" he exclaimed, pushing them about on the hangers and examining them as if this were a dreadful sort of a store and he were about to choose one to buy. "Gad, look at this taffeta—simply in shreds; there was too much tin in the silk, of course. Look at the embroidery on this, will you? And the lace set in everywhere." He took a dress out and examined it. "Nineteen-six vintage," he said, "charming. Come on, get up, Joan, and put it on. You'll be ravishing in it."

"I won't do it," she said flatly. "Dressing up at this time of night! It's nonsense. Come on home, Fritz, and drop it."

He ordered, "You get up and put this on or I'll take off your things and put it on you myself. Would you prefer that?"

She understood now that sometimes the hateful policy of appeasement was unavoidable. She said, "Oh, very well. Let me have the torch and I'll dress in the bathroom."

She took the flashlight from him and went into the adjoining bathroom where the pink marble tiles had withstood the years better than the wallpaper and carpet and furniture in the other room. She stuck the torch in a tooth mug, lighting the room.

"If you lock the door I'll break in there," he called to her.

So she did not lock the door. She took off her dress and put on a long petticoat and over than an ankle-length dress of white embroidered muslin. It had full

sleeves and a high boned collar, and looking at herself in the full-length mirror, she thought she would have looked rather sweet in this if her eyes had not been so frightened. Then the door opened and there was Fritz.

"Your hair is all wrong," he said. "It should be in a pompadour. Let's see if we can find some pins."

They went into the bedroom again and he rummaged around among the little painted china boxes on a dressing table. There were hairpins of Kitty Aldrich's, and an incredibly dusty brush. He made Joan sit down and hold the torch while he took the counterpane off the bed and wiped thick dust from the mirror, and as she held the light she saw herself and Fritz pictured, all streaked and dirty, in the dark glass, framed in a dim gold oval. His hands moved through her hair, brushing it with that dreadful brush, pulling it and rolling it into a full pompadour. He was like a haggard, crazed hairdresser and she a badly frightened girl of almost half a century ago.

Finally she saw him reflected standing back and looking at her.

"Now you'll do," he said. "Now you're just right, exactly."

"How nice that you're satisfied."

She was still watching him in the mirror. He dropped the brush onto the floor and put his hand in his pocket.

"And now," he said, "and now—if you are ready . . ".

"Ready for what, Fritz? Don't be so melodramatic."

His breath caught as if in a sob. "Oh God," he said, "I can't go on further tonight. I haven't the courage."

"Let's get out of here then," she answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

He picked up her own dress which she had thrown on the bed and fairly ran to the door, unlocking it, slamming it behind him. She heard him turning the key in the lock, and as he did it she thought he was weeping, saying something about poor Isaac, oh, poor Isaac. Then he shouted out, "I'll be back," and she heard his steps running down the hall and the stairs.

Then there were wild chords and passages on the piano, and she stood up and listened, for he was coming to that part beyond which he had not been able to continue. She thought that now he was going to, that he would be able to go on and capture the end and compose it. And if he did, she knew that his frenzy would be eased and he would come up and let her out and they could go home. That was the trouble with him, that complete imprisonment in frustration. It was now as if he were fighting, struggling with the piano, trying to rip his music out of it by main force. And then there was a discord and a crash of hands in the bass, and she knew that he had failed again.

There were no more sounds then except the wind in the trees and crickets chirping and a small animal running across the floor upstairs.

She tried the door, and it was securely locked. There was no door into the hall from the bathroom. There were four windows, with shutters over them. One shutter was sagging, and she thought she might be able to get out there, to make a rope of sheets perhaps, as she had read of people doing, and let herself out of the window and down. She tore a strip of cretonne

from the dressing table, wrapped it around her hand, and, one by one, broke the lower panes of the windows, and after that she tried to open the shutters, but their catches were tightly rusted. She had not the strength to move them, not possibly, although she pushed and shook them with all her might.

Realizing that escape was impossible she went to the bed and sat down on it and considered the situation. If she let herself get "wrought up," as her grandmother used to say, she might easily go out of her mind with terror. This must be reduced to its simplest, most unmelodramatic terms. In comparison with the actual dangers that men had faced in the war, this was nothing. She thought of the few times Murray had mentioned an experience or two of his on D-Day and the weeks following in France, particularly the Battle of the Bulge. That was real danger, something one was justified in being afraid of. But there was nothing in an old house in poor condition to alarm one. Either Fritz would come to his senses and let her out in the morning or her father would have her rescued. She had read somewhere that if you wedge the back of a chair under the handle of a door no one can get through, so she did this and felt a shade safer. Then, completely exhausted, she lay down on the bed. The blankets beneath her fingers were a wool net of moth holes.

One comforting fact was that her footsteps seemed to have left the house with Fritz.

She pulled a pillow over her head and made herself repeat, in her mind, poem after poem, and then

the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. So, by pure courage and force of will, she managed to reduce this mountain of a situation to a molehill. She drifted off to sleep thinking, "Why was Fritz so obsessed with the Abraham and Isaac story tonight?"

CHAPTER NINE

Over the telephone Murray Caine's voice sounded as if anguish had its hand around his throat. He said, "Mrs. McNeill, I'm sorry to have been so long, but I couldn't get the Judge to concentrate on you. He thought the state police could handle it, but now they're not getting results fast enough, so he finally listened to what I was trying to say and he told me to ask you if you and your husband could help out. Could you bring him over, Mrs. McNeill? Think of what may have happened to her." He broke on that and drew in a long breath as if trying to get control of himself.

Anne thought of what might have happened to Joan; all the intolerable circumstances that one reads about in newspapers, wondering how the families of those girls to whom such things do happen can ever gather their strength and go on with life afterward. And while she was thinking she was saying to Murray Caine, "Have they searched that old deserted house on the road that passes the golf club?"

"No," he said. "You see, she went off in quite the

opposite direction, and we know she wouldn't have gone there anyway."

"I see," Anne said. "Well, I'll try to get my husband as soon as possible."

"Please find her," he said. "Please——"

"We'll do our best, Murray."

"Thanks." And he hung up.

She tried then to call Jeffrey's laboratory in the medical school, thinking that by now he would be there, but again there was difficulty in getting the lines through. She was just pleading with the operator to hurry because this was very urgent when she was aware that someone had walked in the front door of the club and, looking through the glass of the telephone-closet door, she saw her husband Jeffrey.

"Oh, darling!" she said, opening the door. "I never was more thankful to see you," and then, to the operator, "No, no, it's all right. Cancel that call, please," and she went out into the hall, where Jeffrey kissed her.

She said, "My dear, I was just trying to get you. The most dreadful thing has happened here."

"I know. My taxi stopped to get some gas in Millersville and they were all full of the disappearance there."

"Taxi?" she said. "You didn't drive all the way over from home in a taxi?"

"No. Mary told me about your call home early this morning, so I took a plane to Poughkeepsie and a taxi up here. It made very good time. Now, Anne, what is it all about?"

She answered, "My dear, I don't want to waste any time at all. Let's go right out and get into my car

and begin to hunt. I'll just rush up and get my hat and coat."

She came down shortly and they went out into an overcast and windy day. They sat in Anne's car on the club driveway while she told him what had happened since she arrived in Claesburg.

He listened carefully, considering her story, looking more and more concerned.

She said, "Do you think she has been killed, Jeffrey?"

"She may have committed suicide."

"In other words, her footsteps finally caught up with her."

"She may, of course, just be lying hurt somewhere in the woods."

"Or have been murdered."

"There is always, unhappily, that possibility."

They were both quiet a moment, thinking, until Anne said, "Jeffrey, I have just thought of an extremely disturbing chain of circumstances, and in spite of what Murray Caine said, I want to drive out to the Dark Hill house at once. Jeffrey, I think that Fritz Rolet and the cook were lying about Joan's having gone off in the other direction. I think that Fritz took her to the Dark Hill house and murdered her."

Jeffrey started the car and drove out of the club drive.

"To the right," Anne said.

He asked, "Why have you come to this conclusion, Anne?"

She said, "Let me tell you. Yesterday I heard Fritz playing a composition of his on the club piano. It's a piano concerto, pastoral in mood, about shepherds

and nymphs and so on, and is really surprisingly good. But apparently he can't think of the end of it. Two or three times yesterday he tried and tried and said that the end eluded him. There were a lot of little girls leaning on the piano listening and they begged him to play the part where the nymph drowns the poor shepherd whom she loved. I think it may be significant that Rolet said that he supposed the reason he could not feel the end was because he had never known deep grief, had never gone through the experience of death with one he loved."

"Well," Jeffrey said, "I still don't see that that indicates that he murdered his cousin." He was driving fast along the road where Anne had walked the evening, going in the direction of the Dark Hill house, I heard him say, 'The story of Abraham and Isaac has always appealed to me very strongly.' "

"Abraham and Isaac?"

"Yes, Abraham taking his son Isaac off to sacrifice him. His beloved son. Isn't there perhaps a parallel? Fritz Rolet was thinking of sacrifice, of the killing of something one loves—and Joan has disappeared, Jeffrey."

"Yes, she has disappeared."

"Don't you see!"

"Yes, but——"

"And last night I thought I saw a light flash on and off quite high among the trees around the Dark Hill house."

He said, "I can't see that Rolet has sufficient motive to kill the girl whom he apparently loves."

"But Jeffrey, that's just the point, that he does love her so deeply. It is perversion, but to him the most

important thing in life is the finishing of that composition of his. He thinks the Philharmonic will take it for their next season's program. He has never accomplished anything of value, and if he feels that he lacks a certain emotional experience and that that lack prevents his completing his great work, I think he will take steps to remedy the lack, and in his egoism will be confident that no one will ever find him out."

"I certainly hope you're mistaken," Jeffrey said.

They had come to the broken black iron fence of the Dark Hill estate.

They drove in the gateway over what remained of the washed-out, weed-grown drive. This did indeed seem the perfect setting for death and violence, for what had been a lawn was now knee-high meadow grass and purple asters and goldenrod running in waves before the wind. A dry fountain, consisting of a vast green-bronze shell and three broken dolphins, rose from an island of bushes in this sea of a meadow. And the house as they circled up to it seemed to have arrived at a state of insane, diseased dilapidation, with paint peeling and gone from great red patches of bricks which had once been white. The wood of the balconies and shutters was rotting and falling away.

"It is inexcusable," Anne said, "to allow any structure to lose its self-respect to such an extent. Let's go in the front door decently. You probably have a key that will work."

Jeffrey took a torch from a pocket of the car and they got out.

They went to the front door as if they expected it to be opened by a butler or a neat maid in black

uniform and white apron, but there was no illusion of a normal continuity of life and order when Jeffrey turned his master key in the lock and the two stepped into the hall.

The place was damp and cold with the inevitable chill of all closed houses, and when Jeffrey turned the light this way and that it was shocking to see the condition of the walls and ceilings and of the furniture, which had once been beautiful and valuable, in such utter ruin now.

And that chandelier in the drawing room with its hundreds of glass pendants, brown with accumulated dirt!

Anne took the torch a moment and stepped into the drawing room. Jeffrey followed her and they stood looking at the piano.

He said, "Yes, someone has been playing this recently."

As they went out into the hall he took the torch and played the light ahead of them onto the floor, and then as they came to the wide stairs he slanted the light up, on the steps.

He said, "There are footsteps in the dust; a man and a woman went up here not long ago."

"The man wore sneakers," Anne said. "Fritz Rolet had on sneakers. I saw them yesterday at the club and noticed last night that he still wore them."

She and Jeffrey were leaning over, examining the stairs.

He said, "The man went up and came down. I think you had better wait down here, Anne, while I go up and look around."

She said, "No, please, Jeffrey, I'd rather go with you. You're worried, aren't you, because only one person came down—only the man?" She was whispering.

"It doesn't look too well," he said. "Anne, go on out. You look as if you need some air."

She looked at Jeffrey and saw that he too was convinced that Joan's body was here in this house.

"I'm all right, Jeffrey. I don't want to stay downstairs alone, to tell the truth. What if Fritz Rolet comes back at any minute? I'll come up with you," she said a little breathlessly.

"You don't know what we'll find."

"I know—I know." She felt as if they were held here at the bottom of the stairs in some monstrous, abnormal enchantment, that they could not break free even to speak or move normally. Then as they stood there she thought she heard some slight sound, as of a step upstairs, and perhaps some animal stirring, and she said, "Jeffrey, it is just possible that she may be alive still, and if she hears us coming she'll think her footsteps, her hallucinations are following her and she'll be frightfully frightened."

"You're right," he said. "We'll call."

And Anne shouted, "Oh, Joan, Joan Rolet, are you upstairs?" Although as she called she thought, "There's no use in doing this. The child is up there somewhere, dead."

"Oh, Joan Rolet!" Jeffrey called.

And then, to their astonishment and most vast relief, there came from above a pounding and rattling on a door and a girl's voice calling, "Come up, please, whoever you are. I'm locked in here."

They ran up the stairs and down the hall. The door,

which was still being banged on, was locked, and it was not the sort of lock that could be opened by Jeffrey's passkey. He wrapped his hand in a handkerchief and tried to break in one of the panels of the door, but the wood was too strong. Finally he was able to kick in the panel, and in a few moments Anne and he were in the room.

Spotlighted by the torch, the girl was the perfect central actor in the setting of the room. A little light came in through the shutters, enough to give an impression of disintegrating elegance, the furniture falling to pieces, the stained and almost obliterated painted cupids throwing roses at each other on the ceiling. And with her hand on one of the brass balls of the foot of the bed stood Joan, with her pallor accentuating the darkness of her eyes. The light of the torch showed that the long embroidered dress she was wearing was gray with dust and badly wrinkled. The high boned collar should have had above it a gay little face with hair in an absurd pompadour of the times, not Joan's face with the severe line of the bang across the forehead and the lank hair reaching to her shoulders.

She didn't seem to know what to say when the McNeills got themselves with difficulty through the broken door. She stood and looked at them as if she were dazed, and Anne thought that the child's mind had not been able to stand up to this experience, that poor Joan Rolet had gone—well, there was no other word for it—had gone mad.

She said gently, "You're Joan Rolet, aren't you? We're Dr. and Mrs. McNeill. I'm sure you would like us to take you home, wouldn't you?"

But the girl did not respond. She sat down on the

edge of the bed and asked, "How did I get here?"

"Well, I don't know." Anne said in a matter-of-fact way. "I saw you walking out in this direction with your cousin Mr. Rolet last evening."

"Did I?" Joan said, and shook her head vaguely.

Anne held the flashlight, and Jeffrey was standing with his hands on the brass bar of the foot of the bed, looking at Joan with an analyzing professional expression.

Anne said, "However, you were not wearing that dress. It was a silvery blue, and charming. Why don't you put it on and come with us?"

"I don't know where it is," the girl said. "I couldn't find it this morning."

"Perhaps it's in the bathroom," Anne suggested. She went in the next room with its pink marble tiles, but there was no dress there. That was a curious fact, unpleasant in implication. She heard Jeffrey asking:

"How do you happen to be here, Joan, with the door locked?"

"It's extraordinary, isn't it?" the girl answered. "I should think I must have amnesia."

He said sternly, "This isn't good enough, Joan. You'll have to make some reasonable explanation to the state police, you know. And also to your parents."

Anne came out of the bathroom and stood by her husband at the foot of the bed. She said, "Jeffrey, let's not bother her for explanations now. She's very tired."

The girl was rubbing her hands together, looking at them. She said, "Yes, I am very tired, Mrs. McNeill. It hasn't been pleasant here. I think I should have gone completely mad if it hadn't been for that old

Ladies' Home Journal. I sat over there this morning where a little light came in through the shutters and read it from cover to cover. I should like to go home, please, and couldn't you get me in the back way so I won't have to see anybody until I can get out of this crazy dress?"

Anne said in a low voice to her husband, "It certainly would be the delight of the reporters."

"Reporters!" Joan sounded frightened and now entirely alert. "Are there reporters around? Mrs. McNeill, can't we drive to the club? You're staying there, aren't you? I saw your name on the register yesterday. And perhaps you could bring out one of your dresses, or a skirt and sweater for me, and a towel, and I'll change in your car before we reach our place, and then I'll say that Fritz and I were playing a silly child's game of hide-and-seek and I ran away from him and sprained my ankle in a brook. I'll wrap my ankle in the towel and limp——"

Jeffrey said with very obvious disapproval, "Your cousin's story is that you and he returned from your walk and shortly after nine went out to the garage to fetch something you had left in the car—and the maid Cora says she saw your flashlight dancing down across the fields."

"I can't understand Cora," Joan said, "because I didn't— well, we'll skip Cora now. Perhaps it's better if the family believe I did dance down over the fields. There was a moon, and I wanted to take a walk and I sprained my ankle and lay half unconscious in the mud of the little river all night, and you two found me and Mrs. McNeill lent me her clothes because mine

were so wet and muddy. That's a good, watertight story, Dr. McNeill." She got up from the bed. "Let's go," she said.

He said to her, "I shall have no part of this lie, Joan, and I think that your cousin Fritz Rolet should be arrested and questioned."

She said with dignity, "Please, Dr. McNeill, for my father's sake, and for mine too, let us let this drop as soon as possible. The appearances are far worse than the facts. I have not been hurt, I assure you. I am all *right!* You see, my cousin Fritz thinks I am making a very great mistake in a certain decision and he rather absurdly locked me up here to try to make me change my mind. It was a melodramatic and ridiculous thing to do, but he is melodramatic. However, he wouldn't hurt me." Finishing this defense, she stood still and listened, and there came into her face such an expression as she might have had if she had had a preview of her child being run over by a truck.

"There's someone coming," she cried. "Coming up the stairs!" She was trembling and almost in tears.

Anne put her arm around the girl's shoulders. She said, "Jeffrey, go out into the hall and see if there is anyone. Joan has had too much of this," and then, knowing how calming and restoring to the feminine spirit it is to consider clothes, she added, "We're going to take you to the club, Joan, where I shall get you my new tomato-colored wool skirt and beige sweater, and then we shall take you home, and since, Jeffrey, she is not actually hurt at all, I think she should give her parent any explanation she thinks best."

Jeffrey said shortly, "Just as you wish," and

then said to Joan, "Do you hear the footsteps now?"

Listening, she said, "No, not now. They seem to have stopped."

"You're quite safe with us, anyway," he said. "I think we can all squeeze through the broken panels of the door."

A half hour later Anne drove a well-renovated Joan up the driveway to the Rolets' house. Jeffrey had refused to come. He lay on the chaise longue in his wife's bedroom at the club looking at magazines. If Joan and Anne wanted to lie about all this, he had said, it was their prerogative to make their own decisions, but for himself he would have no truck with it, and anyway, the Rolets would shoot holes in her story in about three minutes.

It was fortunate that Anne and Joan arrived at a moment when no reporters or police were about. In fact, no one was in evidence at all. Joan, in Anne's skirt and sweater and with a towel around her ankle, limped ostentatiously up the front steps and into the hall. Anne followed her.

A Sheraton mirror agreeably doubled the effect of a bowl of marigolds and zinnias on a table. There was a tile floor in the hall, and through open doors you caught pleasant glimpses of rooms furnished in almost the best of Victorian and modern taste. Yet curiously, although no one was to be seen, there was in the house an almost palpable heaviness of anxiety and grief.

"I don't want to startle them too much," Joan said.

"I imagine they will be able to stand it."

Joan called, "Whoooo-hoooo—everybody. Where are you? I'm back safely. Come on downstairs!"

The family appeared from all directions: the Judge from his library, his wife from the side terrace; Cora, nearly in hysterics, from the kitchen; Tom tearing down stairs and in his excitement falling and bumping down the last six steps. Fritz Rolet followed him, but not falling, standing in the middle of the stairway, looking down; and Murray Caine at that moment came up the front steps and in the door. He took Joan in his arms, and her parents and Tom came up and encircled them too.

The boy was crying. It is a moving thing to see a sixteen-year-old boy weep. The others, too, were not far from tears.

Anne withdrew a little, feeling that she had no right to be here. She looked up at Fritz Rolet's frightened face and wondered what he would do now.

In the midst of the clamor of exclamations and joy and questions Joan was telling her story.

"You see, after I went out to the garage," she said, "I thought I would take a little walk in the moonlight, and I sort of danced along across the field and down into the woods, and I fell and sprained my ankle, dreadfully——" She did not look up at Fritz, and he still stood above them, biting the side of his right forefinger indecisively.

"But, honey," Murray Caine said, "how come you were lying hurt down there in the woods all night by the river? I myself combed those woods through with a toothbrush, and so did the state police. Didn't you hear us, honey? Why didn't you shout to us?"

"I must have lost consciousness."

"Get the doctor for her ankle," the Judge was say-

ing. "Good gracious, Alice, the child may have broken it."

"No, I didn't break it. It's much, much better today. I—Mrs. McNeill bound it up and it's all right, truly."

"Nonsense, it must be X-rayed——"

"Darling, what have you got *on*?" her mother said. "It's lovely, but surely that isn't one of your skirts."

They were still all standing in the hall and Joan's story was indeed, as Jeffrey had predicted, being shot to pieces. The whole fabric of it was disintegrating.

"Oh, this is Mrs. McNeill's skirt and sweater," Joan said with a sort of desperation. "Mother darling, Father, this is Mrs. McNeill—she and her husband found me."

The Rolets then turned to Anne with swift and most gracious apologies for having ignored her in the midst of their joy and emotion.

The Judge said, "Mrs. McNeill, my wife and I owe you a debt which we could never repay," and his wife echoed that and wiped tears from her eyes.

Tom said, "Gosh, Mrs. McNeill, would you and your husband mind if I used you—under other names, of course—in my comic-narrative adventure sequence I'm doing? My heroine's going to get lost in the solar system and really it would be awfully sharp if you and your husband could trace her up the Milky Way and so on——" His voice, still unsteady with the quick succession of joy after grief, was shooting up and down the scale.

Everybody laughed. They needed laughter. Anne said, "I'm afraid my husband and I would have a difficult time tracing your heroine through the solar system."

Murray had Joan's hand in his. He was leaning against the newl post of the stairs and he looked at Anne and said, "Where did you really find her, Mrs. McNeill?"

She raised her eyebrows, trying to indicate that he should let well enough alone, but the harm was done.

And perhaps it was that Joan was so tired that she didn't realize what she was doing when she said, "The McNeills were wonderful. They knew that I might be frightened if I just heard their footsteps, so they shouted and called me, and I rattled the door and answered, and they came up and broke down the door."

"The door!" her parents and Tom exclaimed.

"Oh!" The girl put her clenched fist to her mouth and looked up at Fritz.

Caine said, "I thought there was something mighty odd about all this. Honey, I think you'd better tell the truth now."

The maid Cora suddenly cried out widly, "I didn't mean to do no harm, but I wanted the twenty-five dollars."

"What do you mean, Cora?" the Judge demanded, horrified.

Then Fritz came down the stairs and stood two steps above them all, centered, dramatic, making the most of it. He ran his right hand through his hair, pushing it off his forehead. He said, "It was my fault, all of it. I don't know what gets into me at times like that. I think I'm going mad. I must be. I think there's something in the family——"

"Don't be a fool," the Judge barked in fury. "There

never was a sign of madness in this family. Go on, go on. What did you do, Fritz?"

The anxiety that had been scattered by their joy was now gathering again into tension.

"What did I do!" Fritz said. "Why, when I think of it I get sick, simply ill with contrition and shame and disbelief. I can't *believe* it myself. And the thoughts I had—I mean I wanted to—well I didn't—you see, I never can carry anything through to its logical conclusion no matter what it is. I swear I think sometimes I'm under the domination of devils like those people in the New Testament."

"Go on, Rolet, stick to your story," Caine said. He dropped Joan's hand and stepped to the stairs.

"Well, in the first place, it was all my fault about Cora. She needed that twenty-five dollars for the dentist and I told her what to say about Joan's going out to the garage."

"Cut out Cora," Murray Caine said. "We don't care about that. What did you do with Joan?"

"Well, I didn't hurt her. I swear I didn't hurt her."

"No, he didn't," Joan said quickly. "That is absolutely true."

"I just took her to the old Aldrich house and we went in and I played on the piano awhile, it's rottenly out of tune, and then—well, I don't know what possessed me, but I suppose I thought it would be funny, a sort of practical joke, I suppose, so I locked her in there." He twisted his hands together to keep them from shaking.

"You left the poor child there in that dreadful house all night!" Mrs. Rolet's voice had tears.

"You must be crazy," the Judge said with heavy anger.

The boy Tom cried, "You—you hellhound," and began to sob again.

But Caine went up the steps, took Fritz by the collar, got him down to the bottom of the stairs, and struck him three times. At the third time Fritz Rolet fell onto the tiled floor. The sound of his head hitting it was sickening.

The maid Cora screamed and kept on screaming.

"Be quiet," the Judge said, and the maid stopped and ran out of the hall.

"Is he dead?" the Judge asked.

They stood looking down at the man on the floor. Anne knelt and felt his pulse.

Murray Caine said, "He deserves to have had me kill him."

"I should enjoy passing the death sentence on him," Judge Rolet added.

But his wife cried out, "There has been too much violence here, too much! If he is dead too, we are all destroyed, all of us."

"Why in the world did you try to protect him, Joan" the Judge asked. He was very pale, an old man with his blood drained off by emotion. "How is he, Mrs. McNeill?"

"He'll be all right, I think," she was glad to be able to answer.

"That's just as well. Get some water, somebody, and splash it in his face." Tom ran down the hall through the dining room to the pantry. The Judge said, "Bring me a chair, somebody. Joan, what possessed you to try to shield him?"

"Because he is in the family, Father; because he only frightened me, and the whole affair was so outrageously bizarre I was afraid of the publicity for us. The headlines would be intolerable!"

"Well, we'll have to tone it all down as much as we can for the press and the police," the Judge said after a moment's pause, while headlines were considered. "I'll have to soft-pedal it as far as possible."

Tom came running back with a silver pitcher full of water which he proceeded to empty out swiftly, and in its entirety, upon the face, neck, and chest of his cousin on the floor. It was evident that he took the greatest satisfaction in doing this, and although there were some slight protests from his mother about drowning Fritz and orders to go now and fetch a mop at once, nevertheless everybody, except his victim, sympathized with the act.

Fritz spluttered, moved, and sat up, resting on his elbows, asking in a voice thick with self-pity what had happened.

"Not one tenth of one per cent of what should have happened to you," Muray Caine said. He touched Fritz's leg with his toe, not kicking him, but giving him a token kick as it were.

"Oh God, I remember now," Fritz said, and groaned, as he had learned to do in drama school, a strong full-bodied groan that would carry to the back of the balcony. Then he moved to a better position with the left elbow on the ground and his head supported by his left hand, which permitted his right hand to be free. He stretched this out toward Joan and said, "My own body I shall offer as sacrifice; my own blood I shall pour out upon the altar of atonement. Abraham

and Isaac in one body I shall be and there will be no ram in the bushes—this time I will not fail, nor will there be a ram in the bushes." Water dripped from his sleeve and ran down his face from his hair and a large bump was developing on the side of his head.

The Judge said in disgust, "Get up on your feet and go upstairs to bed. At once now."

"Yes, before I pay the rest of the bill," Caine said.

Fritz got up with speed and ease and hurried up the stairs. No one said anything. They heard his feet running up the first flight, going down the hall, and then up the second flight. There was a pause and then his voice dropped down, quietly, with sincerity, "Joan, forgive me, darling."

The people in the hall looked at each other.

The Judge said, "A strange, distorted personality."

"That animal," Murray Caine said, "has no more right above ground than a mole."

The episode was ending. The Judge made an effort to gather his strength together. He stood up and shook hands with Anne, expressing his inexpressible appreciation and thanks for what she had done for them all in finding Joan. Mrs. Rolet added her thanks, and Tom, who was mopping up the pool of water from the tiled floor, said that if it hadn't been for Mrs. McNeill the whole family would have been sitting around in strait jackets by this time. The Judge asked her if she would please come with her husband to tea that afternoon. He was most anxious to meet Dr. McNeill, whom he knew so well by reputation, as he had also known for years Dr. McNeill's most distinguished wife.

Upon this courteous note, Anne took her leave.

But as Tom opened the door for her there came from the third floor the sound of Fritz playing his Shepherd's Dirge.

Murray Caine and Joan went out to Anne's car with her, and there were more thanks. There had been a plethora of appreciation.

Anne started her engine and looked out of the window at Murray and Joan who stood hand in hand on the steps. At that moment she saw again on the girl's face the expression of listening and of paralyzed anticipation and she knew, as surely as if she had heard them herself, that the footsteps had come out of the front door and down the steps of the house.

CHAPTER TEN

That afternoon tea was served in the Judge's study, a small, almost square room behind the long music room. The Judge sat behind his office-type desk and the others were dispersed about, some in comfortable green leather deep chairs and some in very uncomfortable straight banister-backed "pieces." Mrs. Rolet sat near the fire in her own high-backed ladder rocker, which became her. So did the pleasant ceremony of dispensing tea from the heavy silver service; so also did her gray silk dress with white pin stripes and long sleeves, the dress just the color of her unwaved, extremely neat hair.

The whole Rolet family, with the exception of Fritz who was not in evidence, looked tired but were making an admirable effort to put the affair of the night before behind them, to minimize it, and, by discussing quite unrelated other things, to carry on their normal behavior.

Studying her hosts, Anne thought that the Judge was the one most affected by the alarm they had just been through. He had a bad color and now and then

breathed as if breathing were pain. She noticed that his left hand as it rested on the desk blotter was slightly drawn and lifeless, as the result of his stroke, and there seemed to be a scar not entirely healed on the right side of his forehead, although the hair had been brushed down to hide the short red line. He had a face that was kind and wise and yet, she thought, tormented, as as if he had in his life seen to much suffering and had shared in it too deeply. He was talking now about the radio and about certain broadcasts of great significance, and they all joined in a sort of spontaneous competitive scoring of important features that they had heard.

He considered King Edward VIII's abdication speech one of the most memorable, but Jeffrey thought that certain of Churchill's speeches would have more value historically; and Mrs. Rolet, a surprisingly ardent Democrat, whereas one would have expected her to be a dyed-in-the-wool Republican, came up with Roosevelt's inaugural address at the time of the depression. However, Tom scored on them all by having heard Orson Welles's attack of the Martians.

They were all having a pleasant, genial time. The tea was one of these expensive, smoky brands most delicious when served, as now, in old blue Canton cups with thin, old family spoons in the saucers. Besides the excellence of the tea were equally good things that went with it, for Cora had outdone herself in propitiatory offerings of toasted crackers spread with melted cheese, small tarts of strawberry jam, cookies in the shape of hearts and birds and diamonds. The fire crackled and leaped most agreeably and re-

frained from emitting smoke in the black marble fireplace.

It was a nice Victorian room with glass-fronted bookcases, several busts of anonymous Roman legal gentlemen, and enlarged brown photographs of Roman ruins here and there on the walls. There were long ground-glass doors on each side of the fireplace, leading into the music room. Through the windows you saw gray clouds hurrying across the sky and pine trees blowing in the wind.

Surprisingly, in the midst of this conversation about broadcasts, Mrs. Rolet broke in with a complete change of subject. "Some red ink spilled on the rug there some weeks ago, Dr. McNeill," she said, "and I was unable to get it out. I thought you were looking at the stain near the desk."

He said, "Oh yes," indicating nothing.

Everyone immediately did look at a large dark spot on the oriental rug, and there was a moment's awkwardness until Anne quickly asked Joan if she had any dramatic radio event to offer.

The girl was sitting near her father's desk, relaxed in a deep green leather chair. Within her hand's reach on the desk was a Sandwich-glass paperweight, one of these solid semispheres embedding a design of gay little flowers. She was looking far better than she had that morning. She wore a green, full-skirted wool dress with touches of peasant embroidery which gave a charming soft effect with her dark hair. She said now that she had heard the broadcast of the opera in which the curtain had to be rung down in the middle of the act because the tenor had eaten bad crab.

But Anne had heard one when the Germans were approaching Paris, at the time of the fall of France, and the French girl at the microphone had burst into tears and been unable to finish; and Murray, just before being sent overseas, had actually heard the explosion of bombs relayed to New York from the BBC one night during the London blitz.

"Where were you in service?" Jeffrey asked.

"England, and then the Continent," he answered, and, under questioning, described a little the landing on D-Day.

Anne was watching Joan. The girl's attention was removed from the room as if she were listening to something outside of it, watching one of the doors into the music room. There was a wide, fearful expression in her eyes and she put out her hand and took the paperweight from the desk. Then she began to shiver. Her eyes were still on that door.

"Yes, in a lot of the towns they actually came out and kissed us and threw flowers at us," Caine was saying, "and they were right pretty girls, too, but none as pretty as Joan."

Anne was across the room from him. She couldn't touch his foot or his arm and so direct his attention to Joan, and she didn't want everyone in the room to look at the girl because in a moment this trembling and tension might pass.

But unhappily it did not pass. Joan stood up and, addressing the air with courteous finality, said, "I have had enough. Will you please kindly go away and stop this following me! Go away, I tell you!" and her voice rose almost to a scream as she threw the

paperweight, shattering one of the glass doors into the music room.

"Oh, honey, honey!" Caine said, and was on his feet, taking her into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder, and smoothing her hair. "There, there, honey," he said, as he would to a child. "You've been through too much. I should have put you to bed and made you rest, honey."

Jeffrey had got up. He said, "Let her lie down on the sofa now," and while she was being stretched out there, with a paisley shawl over her, her mother and father and Tom looked at her in horrified consternation. The Judge had sat staring at Joan actually with his mouth open. Mrs. Rolet had said, "Oh, my dear, *now* with that paperweight!" which Anne thought a strange remark under the circumstances. And Tom had cried out, "Is that Gadarene swine snooping around?" and leaped from the room.

There was then a certain amount of confusion which Jeffrey did his best to quiet. Joan, under the paisley shawl, was still shivering, trying by clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. Caine was kneeling on the floor beside her, holding her hand and smoothing her hair, and the Judge, standing by the mantel and holding onto that for support, was demanding why in the world she had thrown that paperweight, what she thought she was throwing it at. He seemed frantically anxious and distressed.

Mrs. Rolet, equally upset, had hurried out and brought back a brush and dustpan and was sweeping up the mess.

To an accompaniment of the small slash of broken glass, Joan was saying, "Of course that's the end

now. There's nothing for it but for me to go to some asylum. Oh dear, oh dear, I fought it so; I had so *hoped* I wouldn't have to!" and she sat up on the sofa, rocking back and forth, crying, her face in her hands.

The Judge said, "Get me a chair, somebody. Get me a chair."

Anne put one beside him, and he slumped down in it as if his bones were giving way.

Jeffrey stood at the foot of the sofa. He said, "Joan, stop crying. Control yourself. Did you hear the footsteps again?"

"Footsteps!" the Judge exclaimed. "What footsteps?"

"Please," Jeffrey said. "Let her speak."

"Yes, they were there," she said, managing not to cry, "right outside the door. I heard them coming down the hall and then up to the door, and suddenly I couldn't stand it any longer. I'd had enough—somebody *had* to do something."

Her mother stood with the dustpan full of glass in her hands.

Judge Rolet said, "What is all this about footsteps? What *is* all this?"

"Auditory hallucinations," Jeffrey said, "Please, let her talk. Go on, Joan."

"There's nothing more to say. They were just there, and I threw the paperweight at them the way I threw that brick in the cellar of our New York house, and I realize perfectly well that you are stark, staring crazy when you begin throwing things at nothing." She began to shake again.

Jeffrey said, "Listen to me, Joan, something can be

done about this, you know. You've tried to cope with this alone for too long. Now, if you are willing, we can help you. Are you willing to co-operate?"

She said, "I'm fairly desperate, Dr. McNeill. I'm willing to do anything."

"But how do you all know about this, Dr. McNeill?" the Judge demanded. "Alice, have you been hiding something about Joan from me?"

"I know nothing whatever about it," Mrs. Rolet said. Her voice was displeased.

"Nobody knew anything about it, Father, except Murray," Joan said. "I had to tell Murray."

"And I went up and consulted the McNeills," Caine said. "I wanted Joan to talk to Dr. McNeill about it. We didn't want, sir, to worry Joan's mother and you."

Mrs. Rolet picked a splinter of glass from the floor and, as she straightened up, said, "If Joan heard footsteps I have no doubt that Fritz was tiptoeing around down the stairs and into the music room. That is just the sort of thing he would do."

"But it couldn't always have been Fritz, Mother," Joan said. "It might sometimes, I will admit, but not always."

"If it wasn't Fritz, then it was your imagination," her mother answered shortly, and it was obvious that her Van Doon good practical common sense was speaking. "I have no doubt at all that any footsteps Joan has been hearing have been a combination of Fritz's mischief and the Rolet imagination, and I see no necessity whatever of her consulting a physician about a matter as simple as that, although," she amended, in order not to seem rude to the McNeills who after all had found her daughter in the Aldrich house,

"we are delighted to have Dr. and Mrs. McNeill as our friends."

Jeffrey said, "Where is Fritz Jolet? Is he in the house?"

The Judge said, "Yes, unfortunately I couldn't turn him out because he developed a temperature." He spoke with disgust.

"He always has done just that under emotional stress," Mrs. Rolet said. "It was very difficult. That is why he is spoiled. It was always impossible to discipline him."

"He always took refuge in fever and pretended remorse," the Judge said. "Alice, fever or nor fever, we should have disciplined him as a child. Where's Tom? Didn't he go out to find him? Of course it must have been he Joan heard, and naturally she's all upset after last night. The most natural thing in the world." He sounded relieved.

Tom came plunging down the stairs. He stood in the doorway and said, "I think the Gadarene swine's temperature has gone up. He's lying there looking at the ceiling and babbling about his being Abraham."

Anne thought uneasily, "I don't like the persistence of that Abraham obsession in his mind."

Jeffrey was taking Joan's pulse. He said to her quietly, "Joan, I think you'd better go to bed and I'll give you a capsule to make you sleep. Let Mrs. McNeill go up with you now, and in the morning we'll get right after these footsteps and eliminate them."

His authority was resolving the difficult situation into order. After Anne had taken Joan upstairs he said to the Judge, "If Tom would go up and sit with his sister, in a few minutes, I should like to talk

with you, Judge Rolet, about your daughter's condition, if you can give me half an hour."

"Of course, I shall be glad to," the Judge answered, and added in concern, "You don't think it serious, do you?"

"It is serious," Jeffrey answered. "I think we will wait for our conference until my wife comes down."

Twenty minutes later the McNeills, Murray Caine, and the Judge and Mrs. Rolet sat in the library discussing the disturbing subject of Joan and her footsteps.

"We have a very good man," Jeffrey was saying, "Dr. Allen Shaw, who handles all our cases of this sort. I think first he should give your daughter a neurological examination."

The Judge said, "You and Murray, Dr. McNeill, say that Joan has been having auditory hallucinations for about a month now, and the child evidently thinks she is losing her mind. I don't believe in evading the truth. It has been a family policy to look truth in the face, at least I have always tried to do so. Now, is there any tragic possibility that Joan's mind is becoming unbalanced?" He leaned forward anxiously over his desk.

"There are several possibilities," Jeffrey answered. He was sitting on the sofa across the room, and Mrs. Rolet, who sat near him, leaned over, took up the paisley shawl which was rumpled beside him, took it to her lap, and began to fold it.

"Well, Dr. McNeill, let us have the possibilities," the Judge said.

"These hallucinations might be caused by one of

several neurological conditions: brain tumor, migraine, or epilepsy. I think they should not be ignored."

"Good God, no," Murray Caine said.

The Judge looked stricken but Mrs. Rolet went on folding her shawl with a set look about the mouth. She was not going to admit the existence of brain tumors and epilepsy. Migraine, perhaps. Her own mother had been a sufferer from migraine and that was a reasonable, conventional malady, but by no means the other two, either of which would be a physiological disgrace.

"It is by no means inevitable," Jeffrey continued, "that your daughter has anything of the sort. These footsteps she hears may be the result of some anxiety state or repressed emotion. I dislike these idioms, which are overused, but they do convey the meaning. She may have some deeply covered disturbing images or thoughts which are emerging as auditory hallucinations. If so, these sources should be uncovered, and uncovered as quickly as possible. The cause may stem back to some experience of her childhood: fear, the loss of somebody or something she loved dearly, anxiety, guilt——"

"There is no reason in the world why she should have any feeling of guilt," the Judge interrupted with heavy emphasis.

And his wife, knotting a few strands of the shawl's fringe, said nervously, "The whole trouble with Joan is the Rolet imagination just slightly out of control because she is overtired; nothing that can't be put right by hot milk and a week or two of more sleep. You know, Joseph, how opposed I have always been to psychoanalysis. Remember how they took Nancy

Applegate off to be analyzed and it simply ruined her emotionally."

"She always was ruined emotionally," the Judge put in, but his wife swept on with her protest.

"If you begin to poke and probe around into a young girl's private fears and fancies you stir up the most absurd flotsam and jetsam of emotions—unreal, untrue, dangerous. I am unalterably and absolutely opposed to subjecting Joan to any form of psychoanalysis." She tossed the red paisley shawl back on the sofa and, as if afraid that she could no longer control herself, hurried out of the room.

Anne thought, "She is beside her self with fear of what may be in the child's mind."

The Judge's look followed his wife until the door closed, then he turned to Jeffrey and said doubtfully, "Well, I don't like to go against Mrs. Rolet."

"Just as you say, of course," Jeffrey replied.

Murray Caine said, "I'm sorry, Judge, to take this decision, but Joan says she won't marry me because of these damned footsteps and I'm not going to give her up, so there's nothing else as I see it, sir, but for her to go through this examination and whatever might be necessary afterward in the way of an operation or treatment. I'm afraid I've got to insist that she see this Dr. Shaw whom Dr. McNeill mentions, as soon as possible."

The Judge looked at his daughter's fiancé in surprise. He nodded and smiled slightly. "Very well," he said, "Dr. McNeil, Mr. Caine here has decided what must be done. Perhaps you can give us an idea of what the treatment would be?"

Jeffrey answered, "If Dr. Shaw's neurological exam-

ination rules out the possibility of brain tumor, then, in view of the urgency and to save time, I should like him to conduct a narco-analysis, a technique involving the induction of partial anesthesia or drowsy state by the use of a sedative drug. During this state the patient is questioned and, in a relaxed condition, may reveal in a short time the possible underlying disturbing cause of the hallucination."

The Judge, considering, this, said that is seemed reasonable and asked Jeffrey to make an appointment with Dr. Shaw as soon as he could do so. He said again that he was sorry to go contrary to Mrs. Rolet's conviction, but that if they ignored or neglected this condition of Joan's it might amount to criminal negligence and be almost actionable in the courts. After some further discussion Anne and Jeffrey rose to go, and when Murray opened the door into the hall there came down to them the sounds of the Shepherd's Dirge, the chords in the bass and then the crescendo rising toward the broken passages of the uncompleted end.

Anne stopped and looked at Murray. She had not known whether or not to say this, but it seemed to her necessary now. She said, "If I were you I should not trust Fritz Rolet in regard to Joan, even now after his remorse about Dark Hill."

Caine said, "I don't trust him a minute, but I'm grateful to you, ma'am, for the warning. I'm going to have him shipped off to that friend of his in Red Bank by taxi tonight."

With that reassurance, and with more thanks from the Judge and Murray, the McNeills took their leave and went down the front steps to their car.

"Do you think that stain on the rug was red ink, Jeffrey?" Anne asked as they drove away from the house.

"I hadn't noticed it," he answered, "but when she drew it to my attention it looked to me like blood."

"Poor Mrs. Rolet, she obeyed the housekeeper's impulse of explaining away disorder, you know the way women say, 'My dear, *look* at that spider's web in the corner. I simply *cannot* keep spiders out of the house.' Very unwise to emphasize things that are wrong."

"And particularly unwise in regard to red ink, or blood."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jeffrey McNeill sat at the desk in his laboratory working on a paper. He, of course, was scarcely aware of his surroundings, for the room was to him merely one of the many familiar backgrounds to his life in the medical school: a long room filled with the usual laboratory clutter on black benches and sink boards. There were quantities of scientific glassware, beakers, tubes, bunsen burners, jars, and carboys; there were electrical apparatuses, water tanks quietly and rhythmically dripping; delicate scales and rubber tubes; three round cages of drowsy white rats and seven large jars containing unpleasantly diseased organs and three with unborn, abnormal chimpanzees.

From two long windows you could see, if you looked out, a windy gray sky, rain, a street full of parked cars, wet and shiny, and across the street the hospital.

As he worked, a door of the laboratory opened. It was the one leading into his office.

Anne's voice said, "The neurological examination is over, Jeffrey. We're in here."

"And the results?"

He looked round and asked, "How was it?"

"All right too, I think. Dr. Shaw is coming to talk it over with you."

"Good." Jeffrey got up. He was wearing a long white laboratory coat.

Anne closed the door into the office. She had on a gray tweed suit and no hat, and was looking, her husband thought, quite superlatively decorative.

She said, "Jeffrey, my dear, I think Mrs. Rolet is in an agony of fear about what you may discover in Joan's mind."

"If it is as serious as that, Jeffrey said, "the sooner it is out, the better."

"I suppose so," Anne answered, and went to the door. "She and Joan and Murray and I are in your office."

The door into the hall opened and there came in a short, bald man with a look on his face of habitual irritation. It was Dr. Shaw. He nodded at Anne, who smiled at him and went back into the other room, closing the door.

Shaw said, "Well, McNeill, I think we can rule out the presence of any expanding intracranial lesion."

"I'm very glad of it," Jeffrey said.

Dr. Shaw sat down in a straight chair, tipped it back against a sink, and lighted a cigarette. For a few minutes the two men discussed the details of the examination Joan had just been through.

"Now about these hallucinations," Jeffrey said finally. "Is it your opinion that she is lying about what she thinks is following her?"

"I should say not. I doubt if she can analyze them at all."

"Then we must get right after that at once."

"Do you still want to go on with the nitrous-oxide narcoanalysis?"

"If you think that is better than the injection of pentothal?"

"In this case yes, because we couldn't control it with pentothal as well as with nitrous oxide. Also, this new nitrous oxide technique does not involve any psychic trauma to the patient. However, I should prefer having her come to me for a regular series of psychiatric interviews."

Jeffrey said, "But that is a long process, and with this girl it is important to clear the condition up quickly."

Shaw admitted glumly, "Well, this might speed up things. To my mind that's its only advantage. We could undoubtedly uncover the cause of the girl's hallucinations just as well by psychiatric interviews."

"That might take months."

"It might take some time," Shaw said. "But you realize, McNeill, this is not a truth drug."

"I realize that, but I think that my idea for her to give us, with her hands, a tangible representation of her fear will rule out any possibility of falsehood. She is a girl whose hands are trained to the truth. I think she has more manual than verbal integrity."

"It's an interesting possibility," Shaw admitted, "and of course under the circumstances her hands must be free, so I shall have to hold the mask to her face and work the plunger. Usually the patient does this

herself. I'm not sure it will be satisfactory. If she gets too deep the muscles will relax, but I may be able to hold her at the proper level. Well, we might as well go in and try it."

The two rose and went into the other room.

In Jeffrey's office, at one side of the window, there was a small table. Upon this was a board and on the board a high and roundish irregular object covered with a towel.

Anne was sitting at Jeffrey's desk tactfully engrossing Mrs. Rolet in a long dissertation on spring bulbs.

Murray and Joan were standing hand in hand looking out of the window. They turned as Dr. Shaw and Jeffrey came into the room. Joan was wearing a brown suit, and her tanned skin, the straight lines of her hair and clothes, gave for a moment an impression that she had been carved, most beautifully, out of wood by a very gifted modern.

"Dr. McNeill," she said, and it was pleasant to hear the relief in her voice and to see it in her face, to see that again her spirit was vivid and happy, "I suppose Dr. Shaw has told you that I haven't anything dire the matter with me."

"He told me," Jeffrey answered, "and I am very glad indeed, Joan." He shook hands with her in congratulation and then went over and closed the window, for rain was coming in.

Mrs. Rolet broke off from her bulbs and said, "And now that that is settled, as I was sure it would be, I think we shall say good-by and ask Murray to drive us home at once." She conveyed to the two doctors and Anne the facts that she considered all this stuff and nonsense, had so felt from the first, held them

responsible for wasted time, money, and effort, and was now anxious to get home as soon as possible and close the door on the episode.

Jeffrey looked at Anne with the implication in his eyes that she was to handle this.

She said to Mrs. Rolet courteously, but as if greatly surprised that any mother could be making such a mistake, "You mean that you want to leave this unfinished now without finding out the cause of Joan's hallucinations?"

This put Mrs. Rolet on the defensive. She said, "I know very well the cause. It is her imagination, nothing more."

Joan began to look troubled and too gaunt again. Worry always made her look thin immediately. She said, "But, Mother, I do most awfully want to get rid of those footsteps."

Her mother came over to her, and it was as if she were erecting an invisible wall about herself and Joan, shutting out the others who were watching. She said warningly, with meaning intended only for her daughter, "You don't know what foolishness you may be saying when you are unconscious."

More troubled than ever, Joan looked up at Jeffrey. "Shall I be unconscious?" she asked.

"Only partially."

"You only want to uncover what's in my own mind, don't you, nobody else's?"

"Certainly not what is anybody else's."

"And probably something that happened long ago when I was a child? Just some silly little frightening happening?"

"Very probably," Jeffrey replied.

"Yes, but also possibly not," her mother said to her, with that threat which only Joan understood.

The girl looked at Jeffrey and said, "Perhaps after all we'd better drop it."

Murray put his hand on her shoulder. He said, "I'm going to make this decision, honey, and it's in accordance with your father's expressed wish. Dr. McNeill, will you and Dr. Shaw please carry on? I'm sorry, Mrs. Rolet, but Joan and her father and I all want it this way."

Mrs. Rolet had to retreat from her position then with as much dignity as possible. She said, "Very well, I have nothing more to say. But I insist upon being in the room while the experiment is taking place."

Jeffrey and Dr. Shaw looked at each other, but lacked the energy to try to keep Mrs. Rolet out of the room. Dr. Shaw, in unconcealed and rather rude annoyance, said it was most irregular but if Mrs. Rolet insisted she might sit behind the patient in a chair by the door; that is, if Mrs. McNeill would stay also and see that Mrs. Rolet did not interrupt the proceedings.

Murray Caine, anxious to ease matters, said that would be splendid and that he would wait outside in the car. He patted Joan's shoulder, said she was all-steel indestructible and a model of flowing beauty, and took his leave.

Jeffrey set chairs in the background for Mrs. Rolet and Anne and pulled forward a comfortable blue wing chair and asked Joan to sit in it.

Mrs. Rolet said, "I should like to have some idea of what you intend to do to Joan. Are you going to hypnotize her?"

Dr. Shaw kept his temper with difficulty and not too successfully. He said, "No, Mrs. Rolet, this is not hypnotism. It is a new method of narco-analysis using nitrous oxide and oxygen. I shall shortly bring in an apparatus which has been used for years for analgesia in childbirth and also has been used for self-administration of nitrous oxide in dental practice. There is no danger in this process whatever." He went out of the room.

Jeffrey was saying, "Now, Joan, we are going to give you a gas, as when you have a tooth pulled. It will not make you entirely unconscious. We will ask you a few questions which you are to answer truthfully and we will put something into your hands. You are to do with it exactly as you feel inclined. Nothing will hurt you."

"I am not at all afraid," she said quite charmingly.

Mrs. Rolet said, "May I ask what kind of apparatus Dr. Shaw has gone to get?"

Jeffrey said in explanation, "There is a small mask, something like the familiar gas masks except that this fits closely over the mouth and nose and does not include the eyes. A flexible rubber tube comes out of the lower end of this mask. The tube leads to two pressure tanks which contain, separately, nitrous oxide and oxygen. At the side of the mask is a handle with a small plunger. Dr. Shaw will hold the mask in place over Joan's face and, by means of the plunger, adjust the flow of gas. If the narcosis tends to get so deep that she is entirely relaxed and unaware of our questioning he will release the plunger and so cut off the flow of gas until she becomes, as we say, more 'light'

again; in other words, until she begins to come out.

Dr. Shaw came into the room followed by a laboratory assistant carrying the apparatus in his arms.

They placed this at the left of the wing chair.

Dr. Shaw said, "Now, Miss Rolet, has Dr. McNeill explained this process?"

She nodded and said, "Yes, Dr. Shaw, and I am quite ready."

"Very well then." He turned knobs on the tanks and there was a hiss of gas as it flowed into the mixing chamber. He said quietly, "Ready, McNeill?"

Jeffrey nodded. He was over by the small table near the window.

"All right," Dr. Shaw said. "Now, Miss Rolet, I shall adjust the mask." He held it in his right hand and put it over her nose and mouth, holding it there. "Now, Joan, breathe in and out, quite normally."

She breathed easily. Her eyelids dropped and closed.

"We have her a little deeper than we expected," Shaw said. He released the plunger cutting gas from the chamber, thus allowing Joan to breathe room air.

Jeffrey was removing the towel from the object by the window. It was a large lump of plasticine slapped around an armature into a rough oval shape. He took up the board upon which the armature stood and carried it over to Joan's chair where he placed it across the arms. He took the girl's hands and rested them on the plasticine.

Shaw said, "Now she is lightening."

"Deepen it slightly," Jeffrey said.

Anne and Mrs. Rolet were leaning forward in their chairs to watch.

Shaw said, "I think we have her now at just the right level."

Joan leaned back drowsily, relaxed in her chair, her hands on the plasticine, fingering and feeling it without purpose and yet as if they were where they should be, occupied with this pliable, cool material.

"Joan," Jeffrey said, "when did the footsteps first begin to follow you?"

Dr. Shaw moved the mask slightly so she could speak.

She answered sleepily, "After that rainy week in August when Father had his stroke."

"Do you ever see who it is following you?"

"No, I never do."

"Have you any idea who it is?"

She opened her eyes and, above the mask, looked at Jeffrey and said, "I have no idea at all, Dr. McNeill."

"She's too light now, Shaw," Jeffrey said.

Shaw released the plunger, and as she breathed the gas her eyes closed again.

Jeffrey brought up a chair, placed it in front of Joan without a sound, sat down leaning forward, and said, "Joan, listen, the footsteps have followed you into the other room. Do you hear them?"

She seemed to be listening. Her hands were quiet.

"Do you hear the footsteps, Joan?"

After a moment she whispered, "Yes."

"Model a head of what is following you," Jeffrey told her. "You have it in your hands. You can make the head of what is following you."

Her hands, long-fingered, beautifully formed, moved slowly over the plasticine, experimentally, pushing in an indentation here, adding a lump and smoothing the surface there.

The four people in the room watched her, tensely. Mrs. Rolet got up and tiptoed over to where she could see better. Dr. Shaw scowled at her but she paid no attention to him. Anne followed her, afraid that at any minute she would interrupt and spoil the whole proceeding.

Anne thought, "This head will develop into the face of Fritz Rolet, and then what will we all do?"

Joan's eyes were half closed. Her hands were moving now with practiced decisiveness, almost with a rhythm, and beneath their swift motions a face was taking shape. There was a nose, short and blunt at the tip. The eyes were becoming the protruding, globular eyes of a person with a thyroid condition. There was a flatness of width between the cheekbones, a long upper lip, an indecisive chin, and a set, petty little mouth. The ears were strangely distinctive and repellent, being like long oyster shells, and the hair, as Joan molded the head, appeared to be done up in curlers.

Anne, fascinated, had for the moment forgotten Mrs. Rolet, but she was startled by that lady's giving an angry exclamation and starting forward.

"Please, Mrs. Rolet!" Anne put a hand on her arm. "This is extremely serious," she whispered.

Mrs. Rolet subsided, breathing quickly.

It seemed that Joan had not yet finished. She was adding a most curious effect to the head, smoothing and blurring over the face as if a veil or mask were covering it; an extraordinarily clever bit of modeling.

Anne recollected having seen something of the sort in marble, a woman, veiled, in the Rodin Museum in Paris; but that head, as she remembered, had been

beautiful and this was of a narrow-minded, selfish little woman, a frighteningly vindictive and yet self-righteous small person.

"Joan," Jeffrey was saying, "who is it that you have been modeling?"

She opened her eyes sleepily, looked at the head without surprise, and said, "It's Nettie Noorham."

Anne whispered to Mrs. Rolet, "Who is that?"

"A practical nurse we had for my husband's mother years ago. This is a farce," she whispered, "An intolerable." Her hands holding her handbag were trembling.

"Who is Nettie Norrham?" Jeffrey asked.

"The Perennial Menace."

Mrs. Rolet gave a gasp and started forward, but Anne stopped her.

"Why is she the Perennial Menace?" Jeffrey asked.

"I don't know. I don't know." Joan seemed disturbed.

"She's too light, Shaw, deepen it. Joan, did this Nettie Noorham ever chase you or pursue you?"

The girl, with her eyes closed now, shivered and said dreamily and with unhappiness, "Oh yes, Nettie Noorham did chase me."

"When was that?" Jeffrey was hurrying this now.

"One evening when I had a bad dream; dwarfs were chasing me too——"

Mrs. Rolet seemed to relax a little, and Anne was less afraid that she would break forward and snatch the mask from her daughter's face. She even whispered, "*Dwarfs*, chasing her?"

"Joan, you had this dream and then what happened?" Jeffrey asked.

"I woke up and couldn't get to sleep——"

"What then, Joan?"

"I got out of bed. Everybody was laughing downstairs—a party—chocolate peppermints, water lilies, and salted almonds—ice cream——"

"When you got out of bed, where did you go?" Jeffrey led her back to her story.

"Upstairs to Nettie Noorham's room. I was frightened—frightened. No, no, it's too dreadful!" She began to shiver and sob.

"It's all right, Joan, it's all right," Jeffrey said. "Nothing will hurt you. What happened when you came to Nettie Noorham's room?"

"I opened the door—wrong without knocking—awfully wrong—but I did." She stopped and drew her breath in shudderingly.

"And when you opened the door, Joan, what did you see?"

"The most frightful sight—frightful, frightful, frightful——"

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Joan Rolet was a little girl and her parents gave dinner parties, she was always allowed to slip down to see the table and take six salted nuts and one candy before she went to bed. It was an experience, always, of joy and excitement because she loved the sense of ceremony and the festive beauty of the house. There were always more flowers than usual, often flowers from the florist's, roses or carnations having the most delicious fragrance. And the house, too, had a faint party fragrance of hot rolls and turkey or roasting chickens, and coffee and cake; and the dining-room table was beautiful beyond words with its white Irish-damask tablecloth, embroidered in the corners AVD. The best tall silver candlesticks were out with creamy candles. There was the low crystal bowl of flowers, sometimes, most wonderfully, pond lilies, which Mrs. Rolet and Joan, too, loved. There were glasses for water and wine, tall crystal goblets with gold rims, and white plates, like plaques of snow, with gold rims, and all the silver was newly shined and gleaming, and

four silver bonbon dishes, two with salted nuts and two with candies the color of flowers. Small Joan would stand in the doorway in her nightie, with her eyes shining. Her father, holding her hand, would smile down at her and get her the coveted nuts and candy from the table, and she would give him a "big hug" and scamper back upstairs to her bed and the rag mammy doll who slept with her.

There was one night when all the best things were combined for the party: water lilies and pecan nuts and thin chocolate peppermints. And later, after Joan was asleep, she woke to find her father sitting on the side of her bed, saying, "Want some ice cream, Joan?" What joy to be awakened to be given ice cream! Vanilla, like a slice of melon, with a rind of raspberry ice! Slipping in such lovely cool spoonfuls down your throat while you leaned back in the warm security of your father's arms!

But perhaps the ice cream had not, as Joan's mother firmly said, been such a good idea after all, for the child woke again later, at half-past ten perhaps, gripped still in the terror of a nightmare in which little dwarfs chased her up and down a very slippery hill. Now, lying in bed, the moonlight and darkness formed a dreadful sort of dwarf's face of some of her clothes hanging over the back of a chair. It was a bearded dwarf peeking at her.

Two or three times she called out, "Mother—Father!" and then began to cry and tremble. She pulled the bedclothes up over her head and for a minute felt safer until she thought that the dwarfs might pinch her toes. So she put her head out from

under the bedclothes and called again, but nobody heard her, for the people at the dinner party were laughing and talking and having such a good time in the music room.

By now the child's bedroom had become filled and swarming with fears. She slipped out of bed and ran along the hall, past the room where her poor grandmother lay, so very ill and in such pain.

Still fleeing from the dwarfs, Joan went part way down the front stairs until she could see into the music room, where ladies without any sleeves or collars and men in black suits were sitting around with pencils and strips of paper, laughing at something they were doing. She lacked the courage to go down among them. Their laughter and the warmth and light downstairs made her feel more than ever lonely and frightened, so she turned back and ran past her grandmother's door again, hearing the heavy, tired breathing from the large bed, and she ran past her own door and then went up the stairs to the third floor and down that hall. Her cousin Fritz had his room here, but he was away at a camp in New Hampshire. And although Nettie Noorham, the practical nurse, usually slept in a small dressing room next to Joan's grandmother, nevertheless here on the third floor she had a room of her own.

A small girl's knuckles cannot knock very loudly on a door, nor has she much patience to stand outside in a dark hall, shivering, thinking every minute that crouching little bearded figures will come up the stairs and grab her. So after knocking once she opened Nettie Noorham's door.

It was something frightful that she saw there! A figure in a red wrapper with its hair done up in tight leather curlers, and that.was bad enough, for Joan had always been afraid of hair curlers, but to add to the horror this creature's eyes, bright and protruding, seemed popping out of a blurred brown face of mud, of solid mud! Worse still, this creature made of dirt and hair curlers and red flannel was all anger, and it screamed out, "You naughty little snip you, Miss Nosey Parker, what do you come poking your nose in here for—get out quick before I cut your ears off you."

The child turned, sobbing, crying out, "Mother—Father!" but the dreadful mud-faced Thing came after her, and one of its shoelaces was untied and the little metal end went click after every step.

"Don't you go bothering your mother and father now. They have a party," the Thing called out, but it was not exactly calling, it was like shouting in a loud whisper. It chased her down the stairs, which seemed to get longer and longer and longer and go on down and down forever. It chased her down the hall, coming nearer and nearer, and caught her just outside the door, and when she tried to scream for her mother and father It picked her up, put Its hand over her mouth, and held her kicking, writhing in terror, took her into her room and dumped her onto the bed and said, "Be still now or I'll come and cut your ears off," laughing a little. Then It went out, locking the door into the hall. Joan lay still with every nerve and muscle tense to the snapping point, hearing the Thing's footsteps go, step, step, click, up and down the hall outside her door.

She lay there for two hours in such consuming, choking terror as adults never know, but she knew that the Thing would come back and cut her ears off, so she didn't cry, that is at first. She just lay and shivered and whimpered and twitched. Then she was seasick, neatly and considerately into the chamber pot, after which she began to develop a temperature and then she did cry herself to sleep.

By the time her parents came up the door into the hall was unlocked again and Joan was a very sick child with a temperature of 104. Mrs. Rolet told the Judge it was because he had wakened her and given her that huge slice of ice cream on top of the nuts and candy. He felt wretchedly remorseful and was afraid that Joan would die and it would be all his fault, and if she did he would have nothing else to live for, and he, like his mother, would long for death.

In the meantime Nettie Noorham was quite pleased with herself at having put little Miss Nosey Parker in her place. She had been downright mad at the child for catching her like that in the midst of a Facial Beauty mud bath. She was out of the mood for it now, and she thought she would go back to her own room and take it off and then go downstairs to the kitchen and see if there was anything good left over from the dinner party, but she wouldn't dare go down in her wrapper in case the Judge came out to pay off the extra waitress. "Although his High and Mightiness the Judge," she thought, "would never be aware of me if I was alive or dead," and she remembered with bitterness a certain moment when they had happened to be alone together in the pantry and she,

thinking, "All men are like that," had made a small, unmistakable overture toward the Judge and had been humiliatingly ignored. "And I'm not one to be passed over like I was dirt," she told herself all too frequently, and from telling herself had, one day, told it to the cook Cora. Also, in telling the episode, it became curiously twisted until it appeared that the Judge had made the unmistakable overture, and it was never very clear why, if this were so, Nettie felt herself passed over. But the clarity of her thinking had never been her strongest point.

Now, indulging in some fruitless jealousy of the guests downstairs "laughing and drinking and having a high old time for themselves," which was a luridly colored interpretation of the pencil-and-paper games, such as Categories and Telegrams, which they were playing, she worked herself up into a state of self-pity and indignation. In her own room she scraped the mud off her face, twisted a blue scarf around her head because it was too much trouble to take out the curlers, and exchanged her red wrapper for a white uniform. Looking at herself in the mirror, she thought, "Maybe I'm not as beautiful as some, but I've got something none of the rest of them have. I've got allure, for those as are not too blind to see it. Well, I'll go downstairs." Being at best a rather careless person, she did not tie her shoes, and so, when she passed Joan's door, her steps again went step, step, click.

In the large blue-and-white checked kitchen, a floor below the dining room, she found, as she had hoped, that the extra waitress had gone home, saying she

could be paid next week, the Judge's word was as good as his bond. The regular waitress Mamie had washed the dishes and tidied up and was going right to bed, her feet "was ready to drop off her legs they burned so." The cook Cora, conscious of an artistic effort satisfactorily pulled off, because the dinner had been delicious from the hors d'oeuvres to the after-dinner coffee in the small gold china cups, sat at the kitchen table enjoying a saucerful of melted ice cream. It wasn't every cook, she thought, who could made a melon mold of vanilla ice cream inside a rind of raspberry ice.

"Sit down, Nettie, and rest yourself," she said. "How's Mrs. R.?"

"Sleeping. She'll sleep until two or three under the amount she had tonight. The Judge told me to give her a heavy dose himself. Got any more ice cream?"

"In the icebox. Help yourself. My legs are killing me."

Nettie went to the icebox, helped herself, and came back with another large saucerful of creamy and pink thick liquid. She put her elbows on the table and conveyed her spoon to her mouth with the motion of a lever. She felt gloomy and depressed, out of humor with herself, perhaps for having frightened the child and left her locked up. "But she had no business to be pushing her nose in where she hadn't no right to be," she said, and told Cora all about it, except that she made it appear that she had come back to her room and found Joan going through her bureau drawers and had told her to go out and had shut the door on her.

"That kid's a caution," Cora said, paying little attention to Nettie, because she was thinking about how well the rolls had turned out.

"And when the new baby comes that'll be a caution too," Netties said. "I wonder where they'll put him. I know the Mrs. would like to get that room of old Mrs. R.'s for the nursery."

"She will in time," Cora said darkly.

"In time—but that's the trouble. In how long? Some people don't like to wait forever paying the bills for doctors and nurses."

"I guess they got to wait."

"Maybe they won't."

"No then, Miss Noorham, what do you mean?" Cora's sleepy, dark face became more alert. "What's this you're hinting?"

"Hinting. I wouldn't waste my breathe on hints. Haven't you seen the look on the Judge's face when he opens his bills along the first of the month? A thundercloud, his face is, looking at all the doctor's bills. And do you know what?" She leaned further across the table. "He believes in euthanasia!" She pressed her lips together and nodded her head.

"Youth and age yer! What's that?" Cora asked.

"Euthanasia. It's a fancy name for killing old people and such."

Cora stopped with her spoon halfway to her mouth.

Nettie Noorham pursued the subject. "Last Friday night at supper didn't I hear him with my own ears saying, 'Yes, if it were possible, under certain circumstances I would advocate euthanasia for the incurable old,' " she imitated, exaggerating the Judge's voice.

"That's right. He said it," Cora agreed. "I never thought a thing about it. It was when I was taking off the dinner plates. Where was you, though?"

"I was passing by in the hall."

Cora giggled and said, "Now what do you think of that?"

"It means he thinks it's all right to murder old people," Nettie said with excitement. "It means he's in favor of it."

"My, my—and him a judge!"

"Yes, him a judge—in favor of murder."

The two ate their ice cream, turning the spoons over, bowl against tongue, in their mouths. The kitchen was silent except for the drip of water from the faucet. From the music room upstairs, muted through the intervening doors, came the sound of laughter, and from further up, through the open window and down through the kitchen window, came a very thin, small sound of sobbing.

"What's that?" Cora asked.

The two listened.

"I guess it's the kid still crying."

"Maybe you'd better go up and see what's the matter

"Not Nettie. It's not my job. I said when they let her nurse go they couldn't be expecting me to look after her. I've got my hands full as it is, twenty-four-hour duty and the little pay I get! It's a disgrace it is. You know, Cora"—she dropped her voice—"this family'd be a gold mine if you just got the right handle to turn on them. A gold mine; they're so scared to death of what the papers might say about them."

Cora said, "Yes, but that game isn't always so easy."

"Play it right and it is." Miss Noorham's scarf had slipped to one side of her head, showing some of the curlers. She was excited now. She made little gestures with her ice-cream spoon from which drops dripped onto the checked tablecloth and she said, "Yes, play it right and there's no end to the money in it."

"I don't see." Cora was never too quick at seeing.

"Didn't you with your own ears hear his High and Mightiness say he was in favor of murdering the old?"

"Yes, I did hear him," but she admitted this doubtfully.

"Well then, wouldn't you like some money?"

Cora sat and thought. "I'm always needing money. It seems like I never get enough save up for a new winter coat when I have to spend it all on the dentist."

"You play along with me and you can have a *mink* coat!"

"Yes, but——" She scowled and made patterns with her spoon in the ice-cream saucer. "I don't want to get the family into trouble with the law, with him a judge and all, and besides which it would be harder on Mr. Fritz, too."

Nettie sat back and laughed. She said, "You're sweet on him, ain't you, and you old enough to be his mother!"

Cora's face became red as an uncooked steak. She said with anger, "I'm not old enough to be his mother, miss. I'm only ten years older, and he's a real nice kid, and unhappy. Nobody understands him."

"I should say not. It'd take God Almighty himself to understand that one. Well, if you won't play along with me, I'll do it by myself. You wait and watch

your friend Nettie Noorham. Sometime the Judge'll see I'm not one he can pass over like I was dirt." She leaned back in her chairs and laughed and laughed.

That was sixteen years before Joan's consultation with Dr. Shaw and Jeffrey McNeill at the medical school.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Joan was still leaning back in the wing chair. Dr. Shaw held the mask over her nose and mouth and the girl's eyes were closed.

"Joan, when you opened Nettie Noorham's door, what did you see that was frightful?" Jeffrey's voice was soothing but demanded an answer.

"I saw——"

"Yes?"

"I saw something huge in red, made of dirt—a face all of mud with its hair in curlers." She stopped and her hands squeezed and pulled a small piece of plasticine she was fingering.

"What did the figure do?" Jeffrey asked.

"It chased me down the stairs." Her voice became stronger and indignant. "I fought when it picked me up—her hand over my mouth—she locked my door, and her footsteps outside—and the click, the little click."

"What was the little click?"

"The metal on the end of her shoelace. She never tied her shoes properly."

Beside Anne, Mrs. Rolet whispered, "That's true. I remember it."

"The footsteps up and down the hall," Joan was continuing, "following me, all my life following me." She began to whimper a little, piteously.

Mrs. Rolet said in an almost natural tone, "There now, that is the answer. Let us terminate this, Dr. McNeill; allow Joan to come out of it and come home."

Jeffrey shook his head at her and said, "Just a minute, please. We have not finished yet." If he had accepted that as the end of the investigation the whole situation would have been greatly simplified. As it was, he persisted, with quite appalling results. He said to Joan, "But all that which you have been telling us happened long ago when you were a child. Why has she begun to follow you now again?"

The girl seemed to be asleep.

Jeffrey said to Shaw, "Lighten her, please," and after a moment he repeated his question.

She said, "She is following me now."

"Yes, but why?"

"Because she is dead, of course, and angry."

Mrs. Rolet drew in her breath. Anne looked at her and knew that she was becoming so inflated with indignation that she could remain quiet only a few minutes more.

Jeffrey was saying, "You say that Nettie Norham is dead?"

"I saw her. They were taking her up from the mud in the river—her face all over mud—frightful—frightful——"

"Was she drowned?"

"They thought so. But she wasn't. It was because of the Sandwich-glass paperweight."

Mrs. Rolet's voice cried out in shocking protest, "There is no truth in this. I will not allow it!"

The two doctors ordered sternly, "Be still, Mrs. Rolet."

And Anne thought, "This is very bad indeed. I wish we had never touched it."

"What was it about the paperweight?" Jeffrey asked.

The girl sighed and moved her head from side to side.

"The glass paperweight?" Jeffrey persisted.

There was a great sense of tension in the room. Anne was gripping Mrs. Rolet's arm, trying to control her by force of will, but she again cried out, saying, "This hypnotism must stop. You are putting ideas into her mind and she is fabricating the answers."

Jeffrey motioned her, angrily, to be quiet and leaned nearer Joan, asking, "what about the paperweight?"

"You know. I threw it at the footsteps and broke the glass into the music room?"

"Yes, but before that. What about Nettie Noorham and the paperweight?"

Mrs. Rolet jerked her arm away from Anne, stepped forward quickly, and snatched the mask from Joan's face. She presented the unusual figure of a lady goaded to the point of physical violence, and her voice rose almost to a shriek as she declared, "If you continue this, I shall send for the police. I shall prosecute you. It is charlatanism and chicanery—malpractice—a dubious, unethical experiment instigated

without my permission, carried on against my will. Joan may have been frightened by this Nettie Noorham when she was a child, but there is not one shred of fact in the rest of this nonsense!" She was pale and fairly shaking with passion.

Dr. Shaw turned the knobs of the gas tanks and said, "I think we'll stop it, McNeill."

"Yes," Jeffrey said. He looked sternly at Mrs. Rolet and said to her, "You spoke of the police, Mrs. Rolet, but I suggest to you that possibly we are the ones who should be sending for the police. There is more than a hint of a very serious situation here, and it is my obligation and Dr. Shaw's to find out the truth. We shall stop the narco-analysis, since you insist, but we will have to question your daughter further."

Joan was sitting up straight in her chair looking at the head on the board before her.

"Did I do that?" she asked, astonished.

"You did," Jeffrey answered. "Do you recognize it?"

She looked at her mother anxiously and asked, "What did I say?"

"A lot of nonsense," her mother answered.

"But why ever did I do her hair in curlers? That's the craziest thing I ever heard of."

"Did she ever chase you?" Jeffrey asked.

"No that I remember. It was ages ago that she was taking care of Grandmother, and I don't remember her very well then, except that I disliked her extremely."

"But you don't know why?" Dr. Shaw asked.

"I haven't any idea."

"Why did you speak of her as the Perennial Menace?" Jeffrey asked.

Joan looked at her mother again, nervously. She got up, walked a little unsteadily to the window, and stood there looking out at the rain and the roofs of buildings and the trees blowing in the wind. She said, "I can see our car from here. Isn't poor Murray waiting in it? Perhaps we had better go and rescue him."

"Just a minute, please, Joan," Jeffrey said. "Tell us the whole story of Nettie Noorham and the paperweight. Mrs. Rolet, I'm afraid I must ask you to wait in the other room."

Although protesting, she had to allow herself to be politely ushered out.

The girl stood looking out of the window and no one spoke.

Dr. Shaw sat in the chair behind the desk.

Finally Joan turned and came back to her chair. She seemed very tired as she sat down. She said, "Nettie has made a habit of coming back to see us every year or so in August, and she really is not an agreeable person. I've always had almost an antipathy toward her—like people who hate cats. She—she puts my teeth on edge. And this last time she came . . ." Joan hesitated, as if thinking up what she should say next. "Well, she was more disagreeable than ever. And she said some things about my work, my heads, you know, that made me very angry indeed. I—I'm sorry to say that I have a very violent and ungovernable temper, Dr. McNeill. So I simply picked up the

Sandwich-glass paperweight and impulsively threw it at her in a fury."

Anne was watching Joan's face. She thought, "She is making all this story up."

Jeffrey said, "Did the paperweight hit this Nettie Noorham?"

"I'm afraid it did. I'm afraid it hit her on the forehead."

"And how then do you account for the fact that you saw her being taken up from the mud below the bridge in the river?" Jeffrey asked.

"Did I say that?"

"Yes."

"There isn't any use in trying to hide anything, is there?" She sounded rather pitiful.

Jeffrey said, "I'm afraid not. Can you explain, Joan?"

She answered, "Well, Nettie screamed when she was hit, and ran off and out of the house. People sometimes do, I believe, when they're struck in the head, like that man who was killed by the brass flowerpot bowl in *Busman's Honeymoon*, remember?"

Anne remembered and nodded.

"I suppose," Joan went on, "that Nettie wandered over to the bridge and fell over and was drowned, and of course I didn't think she was badly hurt because she hadn't fallen down or anything in the house, and I didn't tell the police because there she was drowned, so obviously it wasn't my fault, or anybody's. I mean, it wasn't murder, Dr. McNeill, was it? Surely; I've been absolutely sure right along it wasn't murder."

He said gently, "My dear Joan, I certainly hope it

was not. I can't tell. I think that you yourself must have thought perhaps it was murder, didn't you?"

She had leaned over with her elbows on her knees, her forehead in her hands. Her hair fell forward. "Yes," she answered in a very low voice. "Of course I kept thinking of the paperweight. Are you going to send for the police, Dr. McNeill?"

"Not now," Jeffrey answered. "There will have to be a good deal of investigation yet, Joan, before any arrests are made."

She sounded almost disappointed as she said, "I thought you'd send for them and get it over. It has been so ghastly, worrying about it. I was almost hoping that you would at once."

"No," he answered. "But I think that after this strain you had better have a comfortable room and spend the night at the hospital. Murray can drive your mother home. And perhaps you would be interested to know just why you have been hearing Nettie Noorham's footsteps following you."

"Was it because of the paperweight?"

"I think it stemmed back many years before that. Let me tell you what you told us about a certain night when you were a very small girl."

As she listened some of the strain at least seemed relaxed. She said, when Jeffrey had finished, "That's very strange. I do remember now, vaguely, opening the door, and that dreadful red figure with the curlers and the mud face. And when I saw her being lifted up from the river I felt the same intolerable fright. I wanted to turn, shrieking, and run away home as fast as I could run. I'd been out bicycling, and I

came upon that crowd at the bridge and the two little excited boys who found her. I saw them bringing her out before I could get away."

"Didn't the town authorities ask questions about this Nettie Noorham and who had seen her last?" Anne asked.

"Well, you see, she was found over the town line of Millersville, and Claesburg people ordinarily haven't the least idea what happens in Millersville. We don't take the *Millersville Bee*, the local paper, so we really didn't know what was going on."

"But I should have thought there would be talk and gossip," Anne said.

"There was, I suppose, but we—well, it's sort of a Rolet family policy not to pay much attention to gossip She seemed uneasy now.

Jeffrey asked her, "But weren't questions asked? I should think, knowing that Miss Noorham had once been in your parents' employ, the authorities would have come at once to your mother and father. Are you sure they didn't?"

Joan looked uncomfortable. She replied, "The point was that the authorities didn't know who she was."

Jeffrey and Anne glanced at each other. Jeffrey said, "And you didn't feel it your duty to enlighten them, Joan?"

The girl said miserably, "I know I should have, Dr. McNeill, but I didn't. I was afraid. Not so much of anything that might be done to me, but because of the notoriety and the newspapers and what harm it might do to my father."

"I see," Jeffrey said. "Well, that puts rather an unpleasant face on it, doesn't it?"

Joan looked down at the small piece of clay she had in her fingers. She said, "I realize now, as I didn't then, that perhaps your duty to the —well, the State, I suppose, or the community, or civilization perhaps, is more important than your family."

"It's rather too bad," Jeffrey said, "that you didn't realize this sooner."

She said, "Yes, it is too bad. It seems very sad, doesn't it, when I have a father who has always tried to drill into us so our duty to the community? Well, there has to be a sort of human sacrifice, doesn't there, for atonement? Why wait, Dr. McNeill? Why not call the police and get this beastly suspense over with?" Her voice sounded tremulous with tears.

Dr. Shaw got up from his desk and said, "She's tired out, McNeill. I think she'd better go over to the hospital and get to bed. It's an ordeal, an experience of this sort."

"All right," Jeffrey agreed. "You've made arrangements for the room, haven't you, Doctor? Anne, we'll drive over to Millersville and Claesburg in the morning and check up on this."

"Check up? Why check up?" Joan exclaimed. She stood up and held onto the back of her chair. "I've told you everything! I've told you the whole story. You're not going to try to dig anything more up, are you? Why don't you accept my word, Dr. McNeill?"

Jeffrey stood looking down at her. When he spoke there was more gentleness and pity in his voice than he often expressed. He said, "Joan, I hope you have

told me truthfully the whole story, but I remember how you fabricated that explanation as to where you were the night before Mrs. McNeill and I found you in the Dark Hill house. When you lie you lose something of greater importance than you realize."

"But I made up that story to protect my family."

"Exactly. However, lying, even from the highest motives, is shortsighted as well as being unethical. Because you see now I don't trust you, and how do I know you are not pursuing the same course to protect your family again?"

She wept then, in spite of an effort to keep her face from breaking up into the lines of tears, and she searched vainly for a handkerchief in the pockets of her brown suit. Anne handed her one, and the girl wiped her eyes and blew her nose and sobbed.

"I suppose there's no use in imploring you to let this rest now," she said, "and not dig around any further. I haven't any reason to ask you no to, except that it seems so like a dentist's drilling and drilling on a raw nerve."

"I'm sorry," Jeffrey said. "Sometimes these disagreeable processes are necessary."

"And I'm afraid Mother was right and that we shouldn't have gone in for all this after all."

Jeffrey said, "We did so in order to trace the cause of your auditory hallucinations in regard to the footsteps, and that we have done very successfully. I doubt if you are ever bothered by them again, Joan."

"Oh, do you think so!" Her mood lifted into relief. "Dr. McNeill, Dr. Shaw, do you mean that they won't be pursuing me around any more?"

They said that that was exactly what they did mean and smiled at her.

She brushed her hair back from around her face with a slight shake of her head. "Please, let's call Murray in and tell him," she said. "Poor darling, out in his car in the rain all this time. And Mother in the hall having perfect and absolute fits, but then she never did think that anything was the matter with me except the Rolet imagination—and now you see she was absolutely right."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The life of highly colored activity led by the McNeills made a quiet dinner at home a valued experience. They sat at their table on the evening of the day when Joan had had the narcoanalysis. Their cook Mary, in a softened mood, served them a most delicious dinner ending with lemon soufflé of prewar delicacy. Lights from the candles in crystal candlesticks flickered and reflected bits of scenes of the room in the dark red-purple glass grapes in the center of the table. Very expensive indeed those grapes had been, and they were a nuisance, to Mary, to keep well washed and dusted. Anne wore a grape-colored dress with touches of gold beading. It had the faculty of deepening her hair from the color of ripe corn to that of quite vivid gold. She also wore long antique earrings of dark amethyst, a present from Jeffrey on her last birthday. And he, tonight, although naturally not in dinner jacket for a meal at home, was dressed in at least an impression of formality, in a dark blue suit. All in all, the two McNeills and their table, and the dining room with its pale jade-green plastic curtains hanging

in deep folds across the wide windows, made a pleasant sight.

From where they looked into their living room they could see another pleasant sight. This was their older son Michael, newly tubbed. His fair hair was brushed up like the crest of a cockatoo. His admirable proportioned six-year-old body was clad in blue pajamas and striped blue bathrobe. He lay flat on his tummy on the floor, looking at a book of comics, waving his feet, in furry bunny slippers, in the air.

Upstairs the McNeills' second son, Martin, was, they hoped, asleep in the nursery. The nurse was out, thus eliminating a cause of kitchen friction, and Anne and Jeffrey, Michael and Mary had all had an agreeable time giving the baby his supper of milk and strained carrots and putting him to bed. He had responded with most gratifying enjoyment and several enchanting "social," not by any means simply "gastric," smiles.

For perhaps an hour and a half the older McNeills had been able to put the problems of the Rolets more or less out of their minds, and they intended to keep them in abeyance for the rest of that evening and night. Yet, in spite of their intentions, the thought of Joan kept intruding, and Anne could not keep from visualizing a tragic sequence of experiences that the poor child might be called upon to endure. Her story had seemed in some respects unconvincing, thin in regard to the motive of throwing the paperweight, but it would all have to be investigated. She might have to be imprisoned and brought to trial, and what misery that would mean for the whole family as well as for the girl herself. And if she were convicted! But surely

not executed; surely it would never come to execution. A prison sentence would be bad enough; hideous for a spirit like Joan's.

Anne remembered one time when she had been on a committee to investigate conditions in the local prison. She and some other women on the committee had been led through interminable corridors by an official who unlocked doors before them and locked them again as they passed through. They had passed tiers of cells, like animal cages, and had come to a small room where some twenty girls were sewing. They were dressed in blue cotton uniforms, such as Anne's cook Mary wore in the mornings. A matron, a harsh, crude-looking woman, presided at the end of the table about which they were all sitting.

"Rise," she snapped as Anne and the other women came to the door.

The twenty girls rose, their eyes cast down, their hands holding their sewing.

"Sit," the matron had commanded. Pulled by the lever of her authority, the girls sat and went on with their work.

Intolerable to think of Joan dragging through a lifetime of such severity and barren hopelessness, such a negation and death of all beauty and imagination and graciousness.

"We'll have coffee in the living room," Anne told Mary, and rose and went into the other room.

They sat there with an open fire and coffee and with the sound of rain against the window and wind in the trees in the park. Jeffrey firmly took the book of comics away from Michael, and Anne read him instead about Pooh Bear and Tigger. He curled up

in her lap and happily swung one earring back and forth until he fell asleep. Jeffrey carried him upstairs and put him into bed, and they looked at the baby and felt him to see if he were still breathing, which he very naturally was. Anne then got a hatbox from the top of her closet and they took it downstairs.

Jeffrey was just coming out of the telephone closet, where they had left the plasticine model of Nettie Noorham's head, and he was carrying it to put it in the hatbox when the doorbell rang. Anne opened the door and there were Mrs. Rolet and Murray Caine, both wet and wind-blown.

They all greeted one another with some constraint.

Murray, equal to any situation, however, said, "We've just left Joan at the hospital. She told us, Dr. McNeill, sir, what she told you about throwing a glass paperweight at that old practical nurse Nettie Noorham, and Mrs. Rolet says there's no more truth in that version of Joan's than there would be if she said she climbed the beanstalk and stole the hen that laid the golden eggs away from that ogre and his wife. She said it was pure fairy tales. I've brought her out here to tell you."

Mrs. Rolet glanced at herself in the black steel mirror in the hall and straightened her hat. It was the kind of hat that proclaimed her as being, although of course not quite so well born as Queen Mary, still, very well born indeed.

Anne asked them to come in and sit by the fire and led them into the living room. Mrs. Rolet looked at the surrealist portrait and almost recoiled. She sat down in a chair which faced away from it and even

then seemed uneasy, as if afraid that the devils would leap out of the frame.

"It was most unfortunate," she said, "that I was not in the room when Joan fabricated that absurd tale about the paperweight. She was still dazed and under the influence of the drug and not really aware of what she was saying. The whole point of that story is that she was trying to shield someone else."

"I rather thought she was," Anne said.

Murray nodded and Jeffrey passed him cigarettes.

"She was shielding her cousin Fritz," Mrs. Rolet said.

Jeffrey said, "Very generous of her, considering what he had done to her."

"He had done nothing, except play a foolish trick on her." Mrs. Rolet spoke sharply, unwilling to admit that the experience in the Dark Hill house had had any importance. "Nettie Noorham," she went on to explain, "has been in the habit of coming to our house every August to consult my husband on her financial matters. She was my mother-in-law's nurse and has kept in touch with our family ever since. She is a woman of no family of her own—no relatives. But there has always been an antagonism between herself and Fritz, and this last time she came, in August, I believe he saw her and they had some sort of a quarrel in which he did throw the paperweight at her."

"Striking her?" Jeffrey asked.

"Not at all. It didn't come anywhere near her, but he is a very nervous, excitable man and he made a great story of it to Joan, and she, I suppose, took it

all as gospel truth and when you questioned her flew at once to protect her cousin. She has a great sense of family loyalty."

"I should say so," Jeffrey said.

Murray had lighted a cigarette and was sitting smoking, looking at the fire. Anne thought he seemed unhappy, that he looked as if he did not entirely believe Mrs. Rolet and yet wanted to believe her.

"If the paperweight did not strike her, how then do you explain Miss Noorham's death?" Jeffrey asked.

"She left our house in the rain and, in crossing the Millersville Bridge, either decided to commit suicide or became dizzy and fell over into the river."

"I see. Why should she have gone to Millersville rather than to Claesburg?"

"There is better bus service from there in the afternoon."

"And about falling off the bridge? What sort of a bridge is it?"

"Stone, with a low parapet on each side."

"And was it true that your daughter did see her being taken up from the mud?"

"That was true all right," Murray Caine put in, and Mrs. Rolet corroborated it.

"How about the Millersville authorities?" Anne asked. "Did they know who the woman was?"

"Certainly they knew," Mrs. Rolet said. "They knew all about her."

Jeffrey got up and put a log of wood on the fire, then he went back to his chair and sat thinking for a few moments. Murray Caine put out the stub of one cigarette and took another.

"When do you think I can take Joan home, Dr.

McNeill?" he asked. "I don't like to put on any pressure, but I do have to get back to work at the museum as soon as possible. They're being very decent to me—

Jeffrey said, in an absent-minded way, "I should think you could take Joan home tomorrow morning. Call Dr. Shaw and get his release for her."

"Then you can just drop all further investigation in regard to her?" Caine sounded like a man who has wakened from a dream of torture and found it wasn't true.

"I shall have to discuss the matter with the Millersville police," Jeffrey replied.

"You and they will find out nothing beyond what I have told you," Mrs. Rolet said with asperity. "And I assure you that frequently Joan does not know where her fancies end and the truth begins."

The thought crossed Anne's mind that Joan's mother was making her appear to be a very peculiar girl indeed.

"Come, Murray, we'd better be on our way." Mrs. Rolet got up and put on her gloves. "I am much obliged to you, Dr. McNeill, for your efforts, and if you will send my husband your bill . . ." Her manner really was almost offensively condescending.

Jeffrey got up and stood looking down at her.

He said, "We won't do anything about the bill yet, Mrs. Rolet," and then, after a moment's pause, "Did your husband have his stroke the day that Miss Noorham came to your house in August?"

The question disconcerted her. She looked at Murray Caine as if for advice, or support, but he was examining the surrealistic portrait with interest and admiration. Mrs. Rolet took refuge in indignation.

She said, "Really, Dr. McNeill, there is a limit to the questions which even a doctor can ask, particularly when he is not the family physician."

"I am not asking this in the capacity of a doctor," he answered smoothly, but with a slight and unmistakable threat in his tone.

She answered, "Well, as a matter of fact, it was on that day, but it had nothing whatever to do with Nettie Noorham's visit."

"I see," Jeffrey answered.

"That is certainly a high-powered portrait, Mrs. McNeill," Caine said.

"Sometimes I think it is too highly powered," she answered. "A grateful client of ours commissioned the artist for us. Jeffrey and I like it ourselves, but sometimes I'm afraid it puts people off."

Mrs. Rolet gave it a quick glance and said, "Extraordinary. I'm afraid it does," and they all went out into the hall.

Murray Caine, by being particularly cordial and appreciative, was obviously trying to make up for Mrs. Rolet's rudeness.

The McNeills stood in their doorway watching the two go down the front path to the car. Light from the street lamp gleamed on its wet surface, and wind tried to pull off Mrs. Rolet's hat as she ducked to get in the door.

Anne said, "Do you believe the mother's story?"

"I can't imagine why Joan should go to such quixotic lengths to cover her cousin," Jeffrey answered as they went back into the house.

"Unless she happened to love him; but could she possibly love that creature Fritz rather than the nice

boy Murray?" Anne had a high regard for Murray Caine, whom she thought intelligent and amusing and a person with considerable force of character.

"It's extraordinary what incongruities nice girls fall in love with," Jeffrey said, and kissed his wife.

Anne said, "Darling, let's forget the Rolets for a few hours. Let's go up and see if the boys have blankets enough over them. The baby caterpillars himself up so to the head of his crib."

They covered the little boys, who had managed to get outside of their blankets, and they went to bed and to sleep, although Anne's sleep was troubled by dreams of Joan and the paperweight and Joan locked in the Dark Hill house by Fritz Rolet. She woke and thought of the kindly, worried Judge and of Nettie Noorham with her face covered with a mask of mud. No wonder the repetition of that horrifying sight had upset Joan to such a degree.

It was a stormy night outside, with wind blowing roughly through the trees and now and then tearing off a branch and throwing it into the street.

At about five o'clock in the morning the McNeills heard a loud knocking on their front door, and as she woke Anne was aware that she was quoting to herself, somewhat tritely, "Wake Duncan with thy knocking," but, trite or not, it is true that knocking on a door at night is strangely allied with the ominous and the shedding of blood.

"Jeffrey," she said, "there's someone downstairs at the door."

"Hell," he said. "Now what is it?" In his brown bathrobe he had a long monk's body, stalking out of the dark bedroom into the hall.

Anne heard his slippered steps going down the stairs and she got out of bed, put on her own bathrobe, and followed him, snapping on the light in the downstairs hall, but he looked up at her and said, "Anne, better put it out. If there happened to be anyone out here who wanted to shoot us he would have all the advantage."

"I'm sorry," she said, frightened, and snapped out the light quickly. She saw then that Jeffrey carried a flashlight. Opening the door, he played this on the face of the person outside.

It was a young boy in a leather jacket, his straw-colored hair darkened and drenched by the rain.

"It's Tom Rolet," Anne said.

He said, "Oh gosh, Dr. McNeill——Hi, Mrs. McNeill, you know I thought I'd never get here. I guess I got lost a dozen times. I rode over on a guy's motorcycle and I'm afraid it conked out seriously just as I got to your place here. I borrowed it around one o'clock, after Murray and Mother got back and Murray told me what Joan had said about hurling the paperweight at that stinker Nettie Noorham—you know Joan never in this world——"

"Come in," Jeffrey said. "I'll light the fire."

"And you'll have to have something hot to drink," Anne said. "How about some whisky for him, Jeffrey?"

"No, thanks, Mrs. McNeill," the boy said. "You see, I certainly need it, so I wouldn't touch it. We have a family policy not to take alcohol when we need it, so I never do when I do."

"I'll get you some hot milk——"

"Don't bother. If you've got a coke handy, that would do me fine. Don't bother with the fire, Dr.

McNeill. I'm awfully sorry to have routed you two up out of bed, but I had to see you before you got the police after Joan." He was shivering, either with cold or wetness or emotion. But he was glad enough of the fire when it blazed up, and stood with his back to it, still shivering, drinking the coke out of the bottle which Anne brought him.

"Now what's all this about?" Jeffrey asked kindly.

Anne was sitting on the sofa smoking, and Jeffrey sat down near by, watching the boy.

"Well, you see, it's this way," Tom said. He held the bottle and swished the liquid around, looking at it as if he did not quite want to meet the McNeills' eyes. "You see, it was like this. Joan made up that whole story about her throwing the paperweight at Nettie Noorham." He paused and took a drink from the bottle.

"I know," Jeffrey said. "Your mother said Joan made all that up to protect your cousin Fritz."

"Well, now, gosh," the boy said. He shook the remains of the coke around, looking at its froth on top of the black liquid. "That's just why I'm over here. I told Mother that story wouldn't convince a three-year-old kid. 'After all, Mother,' I said, 'the McNeills aren't absolute *morons*, you know. After all, they've been in this detecting game for a good many years now and they don't swallow just any story handed to them wrapped up in white tissue paper with pink ribbons. They'd have sense enough to know that Joan wouldn't be putting herself in the electric chair, or in jail for life, for the sake of Fritz.' You see, the whole point of the matter was this. She made up that explanation about throwing the paperweight

herself because she wanted to protect me." He gulped down the last of the coke, nervously.

"To protect you?" Anne said.

"Yes, Mrs. McNeill, that's right. I was the one who actually threw the paperweight."

"And why was that?" Jeffrey asked.

The boy started his explanation and, as he went on, talked faster and faster, with increasing excitement. "You see, this Noorham woman collected china," he said, "and she's always wanted to get her hands on some of Mother's. My mother has a very valuable collection, you know, and there's one yellow willow plate that's worth any amount of money, I don't know how much. So what did she do that day but she came into the house and sneaked into the dining room and my mother heard somebody there and went in to see who it was and the woman pulled a rod on her and I happened to be right behind my mother with that damned paperweight in my hands and when I saw the woman was going to shoot Mother I let her have the weight. It hit her square in the side of the head and she gave a screech and ran out of the house, and then I guess she ran as far as the bridge and tumbled off and was drowned. That's the story, sir, and Joan made the other up just to cover me. There you are—now you can let her come home and—and set the police on me."

Jeffrey was lighting his pipe. He said, "We're much obliged to you for clearing the matter up like this, Tom."

The boy was trying not to shiver. He said, "Do you think they'll send me to the chair, or to Sing Sing, or a reform school? And, gosh, Dr. McNeill, you don't

think my father would have to try me, do you, because that would be just too much of a good thing?" He swallowed, turned his back on the room, and kicked a log into the fire.

Jeffrey and Anne looked at each other, and Jeffrey said with kindness, "I shouldn't worry about all that yet, Tom. Certainly your father would not be required to try you, and it may never come to the point of imprisonment."

"Oh, really!" He turned, his face alert with relief, then it became worried again as he said, "But I don't want Joan——"

"Don't worry about Joan either," Anne said. "It's in Dr. McNeill's hands now, Tom, and he has pulled a great many young people out of serious dilemmas. I'm going to let you have some of his clothes because yours are drenching. And then, Jeffrey, I think we'll have breakfast at once and start for Claesburg soon, so that the Rolets won't worry about Tom's having disappeared."

"Then do you mind taking me in your car?" the boy asked. "I think there's something drastically wrong with the old motorcycle wagon and I'll have to have it attended to in some garage."

The McNeills said that they would take him in their car with pleasure and would have their own garage see about the motorcycle.

He was following Anne to go upstairs and get some dry clothes when he stopped and looked back at the portrait above the fireplace. He said, in awe, that that really was something and it had given him an idea for his story sequence. He would have his hero crash through into the fourth dimension and find a new

planet and a race of super-devils who kept their anesthetized prisoners in jars in caves in the mountains and they had captured the heroine and stuffed her into a jar and sealed it up and thrown it into a lake of liquid sapphire which became sapphires when you froze it and chopped it into chunks. Now the problem was how you could rescue the jar and pull the heroine out and crystallize the liquid permanently so you could cash in on the sapphires.

Anne and Jeffrey agreed that that was quite a problem, and Anne took the boy upstairs and found him some clothes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the middle of the morning the McNeills, Mrs. Rolet, and the Judge sat in his study. Jeffrey and Anne had arrived with Tom before the boy's parents had been aware that he was not sleeping in his room. They were, quite naturally, astonished. The Judge sent Tom upstairs to change into his own clothes and then asked the McNeills what this was all about. When Jeffrey told him that Tom had ridden over on a motorcycle to explain about Nettie Noorham and the paperweight, it was evident that Judge Rolet had not the least idea what he meant.

Jeffrey had said to Mrs. Rolet, "You did not tell your husband, then?"

"Not about the paperweight episode. It seemed unnecessary to trouble him." She said this defensively.

"I am afraid, however, that he will have to be troubled about it now," Jeffrey said.

"Come into my study," the Judge said, "and we'll try to straighten this out."

So they went into the study, where the Judge sat

at his desk and Mrs. Rolet knitted in her ladder-backed rocker.

Jeffrey said, "Did Mrs. Rolet tell you what we learned from Joan about her experience one night when she was a child and Nettie Noorham chased her through the halls and down the stairs?"

"Yes," the Judge answered, "and I should imagine that that explains Joan's troubles, but where did the paperweight come in?"

"That came later. Joan told us the woman was following her now because she was dead and angry with her about the paperweight."

"Dead? Who was dead?" The Judge was puzzled.

"Nettie Noorham was dead," Anne explained.

The Judge's reaction was astonishing. He exclaimed, "Dead! How long has Nettie Noorham been dead, Alice? You never told me about this. When did it happen?" There was accusation in his voice.

She answered, almost sullenly, "I imagine that she died the day she was here."

"But what is all this?" Judge Rolet said. "Something very serious has been kept from me. Go on, Dr. McNeill, please, tell me all the details. Exactly what did you learn from my daughter?" Trained in composure through years of listening to tales of human defeat, he listened quietly while Jeffrey told Joan's story of the throwing of the paperweight and Nettie's death. Jeffrey followed this with an account of Mrs. Rolet's coming to him and his wife last night, and that second version which differed from Joan's. "Then your son came over at five this morning with his interpretation of it all," Jeffrey said.

Fortunately, as he talked, Mrs. Rolet refrained

from interrupting. She sat and knitted with staccato, irritated motions, her lips held tightly together as if clamping back the things she wanted to say.

The Judge said, "I see. So now Tom has killed her. I presume with the paperweight?"

"So he says."

"And the motive?"

Anne told him the fantasy of the attempted theft of the yellow willow plate, and the rod being pulled on Mrs. Rolet, and Tom's throwing the paperweight at Nettie Noorham to save his mother's life.

The Judge sat looking down at the little flowers in the paperweight. He said, "There are some significant truths in this mass of absurdities. The first and basic fact seems to be that Nettie Noorham is dead?" He looked at his wife, who said:

"Yes, Joseph, she is dead."

"The consensus of opinion seems to be that she was struck by this object?" He turned it in his hands.

It seemed unnecessary to answer this. They sat for a few moments in silence. Outside a car drove up. The front door opened and slammed shut, and Joan called, "Whoo-hoo, people. We're home. They let me out of the hospital early and we simply tore home." The gaiety of her voice accentuated the gravity of the situation. Tom's voice shouted down from upstairs, "Hi, Joan. They're in conference in the study!"

The Judge was saying, "And Joan saw Nettie Noorham being lifted up, with her face all covered with mud, from the river?"

"Yes," Jeffrey answered, "and, psychologically, that is an interesting point, the repetition of mud as a mask over the face. By the way, I brought the clay

head. It is in a box in the hall. Would you care to see it?"

"In a minute," the Judge replied. "McNeill, do you mind if we have the children and Murray Caine in on this? It should not be a closed session."

"As you wish, of course," Jeffrey said.

"Would you fetch them, please, Alice?"

Mrs. Rolet put her knitting in its bag and left the room. Jeffrey followed her and in a minute returned carrying a hatbox. He unpacked the head and put it on the desk. In the fireplace a log fell apart, and outside the storm continued to shake the house and blow rain against the windows. You could see swaying pine trees and a long breadth of soaked lawn. Upstairs a vacuum cleaner rolled and whined.

The Judge was examining the head. "Excellent," he said, "admirably done, very good indeed; don't you think so, Mrs. McNeill?"

Anne said she thought it remarkable, that Joan had most unusual ability, if not genius, and she told the Judge of the head she had seen in Paris with a similar effect of a veil or mask.

Presently Mrs. Rolet came back with her children and Murray Caine, the three younger people coming into the atmosphere of heavy gravity as if they were entering a church.

The Judge waited until everyone was seated and then said, "We have under consideration now the death of Nettie Noorham. There is to be no more lying in regard to it, no lying at all, even with the foolish purpose of protecting someone whom we love. I shall ask you a few questions which you must answer as

truthfully as if you were under oath. Tom, did you throw this paperweight at Nettie Noorham?"

The boy looked down at his hands, twisting them together. He replied, "No, sir; I didn't."

"Joan," the Judge said, "did you strike Nettie Noorham?"

She looked at him and answered unhappily, "No, Father."

"Alice?"

His wife answered, "Joseph, you know I couldn't have," with a sincerity that was unmistakable. But the woman's eyes, Anne thought, looked as if she were seeing the Judge's death.

"Then that leaves——" Judge Rolet said, but his wife cried, interrupting him:

"It was Fritz, Joseph. It was Fritz who did it."

"Mother!" Joan exclaimed. "You can't bear false witness, even against Fritz, and particularly when he is in Red Bank and not here to protect himself."

"Good God, do you love that character from Thermopylae?" Murray Caine demanded, for once angry.

"Love Fritz? Why, Murray, when I adore you——" Tears came into Joan's eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"But you're always rushing to snatch him out of harm's way like he was your one and only darling."

"Murray darling, *no;* but he's always been my cousin and I'm sorry for him."

"And you'd forgive him seventy times seven."

"Please," the Judge said. "Just a minute. This matter requires consideration." He sat with his hands folded on the desk blotter and looked down at the gay

glass flowers in the half-round sphere. He sat there thinking and no one spoke; there were no words to stir the realization of the situation's seriousness, which was gathering, accumulating in the room like heavy unseen smoke, making it increasingly difficult to breathe.

The Judge put out his hand and turned the clay head until it was looking at him and he at it.

He said, "By a process of elimination, it appears that I myself killed Nettie Noorham. How very—strange." His voice had dropped until it was scarcely audible.

"Joseph—Joseph!" his wife said, but he silenced her by a gesture and sat again not speaking, trying to reconcile himself to this incredible fact.

Finally he sighed and sat up straighter, looking at Jeffrey. He said, "Dr. McNeill, before we proceed to the next steps I should like you to have as clear a picture of the situation as possible. You should understand that for the last fifteen years Nettie Noorham has made an annual attempt to blackmail me for the alleged murder of my mother. It was Miss Noorham's contention that I went into my mother's bedroom one night and gave her an overdose of morphine in accordance with her expressed wish. It is true, Dr. McNeill, that my mother, who suffered greatly during the last year of her life, often asked me to have mercy upon her and terminate her pain. I have no doubt that Nettie heard her at one time or another. I am sure that she did, unfortunately, overhear me once expressing a belief in euthanasia. She, I suppose, could not realize that it was purely theoretical conviction that under some circumstances a merciful death would be desirable, *if* it were possible to effect it under

due process of the law, *with* the permission of the sufferer and the relatives of the sufferer and a carefully chosen committee of doctors and lawyers. I suppose I did not qualify my remarks at the time she overheard them, and she jumped to the conclusion that I, a judge, was a murderer at heart."

"She always exaggerated outrageously," Mrs. Rolet interrupted, "and twisted facts all out of their actual shape into whatever form she chose."

"She did," the Judge said, "and, having twisted these facts of my opinion in regard to euthanasia, she decided that not only was I in favor of murder but that I was actually guilty of it. At least she pretended that that was her conviction. And after my mother's death, every year, in August, she would come here and threaten and storm at me and try to get hush money out of me——"

"But he never paid any, Dr. McNeill, did you, Justice? He wouldn't!" Joan interrupted.

"I never paid her one cent, but I don't know how I ever managed to keep her quiet. I know that it required all my powers of authority and tact and that after every annual interview I was left sick at heart and fairly drained of my strength. We now come to her last visit here, in August of this year. I will admit that when I saw her coming up through the rain from the gate I felt that I could not endure another such session with her, that I would not come out of it alive. However, I had to see her and try to keep her quiet again for another year. If this story got around, even with no foundation of truth, I could no longer hold my position in the bench and I should be entirely discredited. It wouldn't matter so much personally,

but to bring disgrace upon my office is intolerable, although"—his voice saddened—"that too must now be faced."

His wife and son and daughter broke in with exclamations, but he lifted his hand, quieting them.

"As I say," he went on, "she came, and we went through the same sordid scene again. She was a very repetitious woman, uncontrolled and coarse. This time she instituted a new attack, that while she was here in my employ I had made unsuitable advances to her. Yes, she stood there at the door, reviling, vulgar, threatening, with her unbearably nasal tiresome voice that every now and then rose to a scream. I had been feeling ill that day. My head ached, my blood pressure was high and rising until the room seemed to spin around and I felt that I must get relief or die. I had this paperweight in my hand." He leaned forward and picked it up. "It is cool and pleasant to hold, and I often hold it, but as I picked it up I thought, God forgive me, of throwing it at her. Then she came toward me shaking her finger at me, saying that I had killed mother, and I said, 'You foolish, impertinent woman, when I loved her so!' and the tempo of everything accelerated incredibly and there was a roaring in my ears and almost a blow on my head—I suppose that was the moment of the stroke. I suppose that in that moment before the stroke I threw the paperweight at her and struck her in the temple. I gather that I did this, although I have only a hazy recollection of confusion, but from the similarity of my son's and daughter's stories at this point I deduce the fact that Nettie was struck in the head with the paperweight, that she rushed out of the house, and,

as a direct result of the blow, fell off the bridge and was drowned. I see that there has been a conspiracy in my family to keep this knowledge from me—because, of course, it appears that I am the murderer."

There were protests and exclamations. "She was drowned; the woman was drowned!" Mrs. Rolet cried.

The Judge lifted his hand again, for silence. He said, "Alice, just what do you know about this? I want the absolute truth."

She said, weeping, "Joseph, I couldn't *bear* it for you! I couldn't see how anyone need ever know. I heard her scream in your study, and I came out here into the hall. Joan and I came. We had been in the dining room, waiting and worrying about you. We came into the hall and Nettie rushed out with her hand to her forehead. Blood was running from beneath her hand."

"And she said that I had struck her?" the Judge prompted.

"Yes, that is just what she did say, and I can't *bear* it for you!"

His wife put down her knitting and wept, her hands covering her face.

The Judge said, "Joan, did Nettie leave the house at once then?"

"Yes, she rushed right off—without her umbrella."

"Did she seem all right?"

"Well"—reluctantly—"she kept her hand to her forehead, and there was the blood, and she seemed a little dizzy."

"May I ask you a question or two?" Jeffrey said.

"As many as you wish, Dr. McNeill," the Judge said.

"Did you, when you had your stroke, lose consciousness?"

"I did. I fell, hitting my head on the corner of the desk. You can see the scar." He indicated the red mark on his forehead.

"When did you regain consciousness?"

Mrs. Rolet said, "He didn't regain it for fifteen minutes or more. As Nettie rushed out of the house Joan and I came in here and found my husband lying on the rug, with his head bleeding."

"Where was the paperweight?" Jeffrey asked.

"I'm not sure. Where was it, Joan?"

"About in the middle of the rug, I think."

"Was there blood on it?"

Joan was reluctant to answer.

"Tell him, Joan," the Judge said sternly. "Enough harm has been done by concealment."

"I'm afraid there was blood on it, Dr. McNeill."

Jeffrey asked her, "When you saw the body, after it had been taken up from the river, did you see any gash on the head?"

"No. I didn't look closely. But I think they said there was one."

The boy Tom groaned, put his elbows on his knees and his head in the palms of his hands.

"The question now is," the Judge said, "whether I committed murder in the first or the second degree."

Jeffrey said, "You threw the paperweight in a moment of illness and passion. It would be second degree if murder at all."

The Judge quoted, " 'Murder is sometimes reduced from the first to the second degree when the homicide occurs in a sudden transport of passion, when the

mind of the slayer is not cool and deliberate and he is laboring under excitement and passion——' "

"Which you certainly were then, Joseph," Mrs. Rolet declared. "All this hairsplitting is *ridiculous*, it's enough to drive anyone insane!"

The Judge replied, with tired patience, "In the courts, my dear, a life frequently depends upon such hairsplitting. But do you see my dilemma, McNeill? Is it first- or second-degree murder?" He was remarkably detached and impersonal, as if the question did not apply to him at all but were a nice legal point to be considered. He leaned forward across his desk and said, "In murder in the first degree, malice must be proved beyond reasonable doubt."

"But I don't believe you had any malice toward her," Joan cried. "You never had malice toward anybody in your life."

"Listen to this," her father said. " 'Murder in the first degree is a willful, deliberate, malicious, and premeditated intent to take life. It is not indispensable that premeditated design should have existed in the mind of the slayer for any particular length of time before killing——' But, my dear friends, and here is the unhappy hitch, I had frequently thought what a relief, what an immeasurable relief, it would be if Miss Nettie Noorham should die before the next August, and so I had the thought of her death in my mind long ago——"

"But, sir," Murray Caine said, "the woman was drowned, wasn't she? Why doesn't that let you out entirely?"

"It appears to me obvious she died as a result of a blow inflicted by myself." The Judge seemed stub-

bornly determined to put himself in as bad a light as possible.

His wife and Joan and Tom now, speaking together in a confusion of protests, said that it was to prevent just this, to keep him from taking it all upon himself, that they had done what they did do; they had known that he would fairly fling himself into the jaws of the law and it was unnecessary and he was making a martyr of himself from exaggerated conscientiousness.

The McNeills sat through this, saying nothing, but Murray Caine finally said, "Dr. McNeill, can't it be determined by disinterring her and making an examination whether or not the woman died by drowning?"

Jeffrey said, "Miss Noorham has been dead some weeks now."

"You mean, then, it is too late?"

The room had become quiet again.

"I'm afraid it is too late," Jeffrey replied. "Any such examination should have been made at the time of death, or at least when the body was found."

"Which is when the Millersville police should have been notified, not now," the Judge said. "Can't you see, my dears, what an intolerably bad position you, with your mistaken idea of protecting me, have placed me in?"

There was a stricken silence.

Mrs. Rolet said wretchedly, "It was my fault, Joseph. I wouldn't let the children tell you—or anyone! I made them conceal the facts. What dreadful harm I have done!" She dropped her knitting on the floor and, unable to control her tears, went out of the room.

Joan said, "If we had told Father at once and let him tell the police, they could have had an examina-

tion of the body and perhaps been able to tell whether or not she died of drowning or that hit on the head. We are the ones who have crystallized the murder aspect of it."

"I'm afraid you have," Jeffrey said seriously, but with sympathy.

Murray took Joan in his arms. He said, "Honey, honey, don't cry so."

Tom was still at the window with his back to the room.

The Judge said, "It seems strange to have to tell my own family that it never pays to try to conceal crime. Well, my dears, we'll not agonize over mistakes of judgment. As Epictetus says, 'Let such thoughts never afflict thee as, I shall live unhonored, and never be anybody anywhere——' McNeill, will you please call the Millersville police?"

"If you wish, sir," Jeffrey said, but he did not, for a moment, move.

Anne thought that he was reluctant to go, and it seemed as if they were all under a heaviness, all moving as in a slow motion movie, but not because of any mechanical adjustment but because of the sheer weight of anxiety and intolerable guilt and regret that this situation had been hidden and so made worse. The rain beat upon the windows and sluiced down and you could hear it thudding and tramping on the roof of the porte-cochere. Outside the clouds were lower and darker, and although it was only a little past noon it seemed to be dusk, as if night should fall in another half hour.

The clay head on the desk was looking at the Judge with its veiled and sinful smile.

It was then that the scream came, like the shriek of a plank of wood when a circular saw rips through it.

"Joan, was that your mother?" the Judge cried.

"I think it came from the kitchen," Tom said. He ran from the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They followed Tom, hurrying down the hall to the dining room, where the portrait of the Judge's grandfather looked at them severely from above the sideboard. The door into the pantry swung to after the boy, and Jeffrey pushed it open for Anne who held it for the Judge. They went through the pantry, down steep stairs to the kitchen door, and, crowding together, saw the cook Cora in the middle of the room struggling out of her blue uniform, standing there in her pink slip, reaching around to her back with her right hand and crying out, "There's a snake down me back! I feel him biting me. I'll die—I'll die."

Mrs. Rolet had come running down the stairs after the others. She said, "Cora, put on your dress at once! What are you doing!"

The maid screamed again and tried to reach down her back.

Anne said, "Come on, Cora, let me see what is the matter."

"The woman has gone crazy," the Judge said. "Cora, control yourself."

And Tom, in a burst of nervous excitement, cried, "Oh my gosh, everything is happening to this family. Now the cook goes mad. We're like those Greek families that had Nemesis gumshoeing after them—Agamemnon and Oedipus Rex and so on—where is it going to end with us? We're on the skids to complete smash-up. How did a snake get down her back?" He laughed hysterically.

Anne had gone to Cora to help her, but the woman, overcome with sudden embarrassment, darted toward a door further down the room. Anne followed her into a large foodstorage pantry. Here, in a moment or two, it was discovered that no snake but two or three large pieces of cooked macaroni were the cause of her anguish.

"How did these get down your back?" Anne asked.

"I don't know," the woman answered sullenly.

"But surely you must have some idea."

Cora shrugged her shoulders and put her hands to smooth her hair.

Anne went out and brought the blue uniform in to her, and then in a moment or two they went back into the kitchen. The cook's heavily featured face was uncommunicative.

There was a saucepan of macaroni cooking on the gas stove.

"Well, what was it all about?" the Judge asked impatiently.

There was an old Boston rocker with a red cushion near the table. He sat down in this chair, for he was feeling the effects of the fright and of the strain that had preceded it.

Anne said, "It was not a snake. It was merely some macaroni down her back."

It seemed funny. Joan and Tom and Murray Caine, who had been so tense throughout the conference in the Judge's study and had been thoroughly frightened by the scream, broke into laughter.

Jeffrey said, "But how did it get there?"

"That's what I asked. She says she doesn't know," Anne answered.

Mrs. Rolet said sharply, "Nonsense, Cora. What did happen?"

The maid looked at a large carton of groceries that was on the kitchen table. There were in it boxes of cereal, a loaf or two of bread, stalks of celery, and a bunch of carrots. "The grocer's delivery boy dropped it down me neck," she said.

The Judge got up from his chair and said, in rebuke, that she had screamed as if she were being—hurt badly. He had started to say "murdered" but had changed the sentence end. The whole family had had a serious shock of fright, hearing her, he said.

Anne looked about the kitchen. It was a long, low room which even red-and-white checked linoleum and a new white stove could not modernize. A door near the door into the hall was partly open, showing an old-fashioned dumb-waiter almost as large as an elevator.

Mrs. Rolet was saying to the cook that she should serve lunch as soon as possible. She might make a tuna-fish salad and open a can of pears. The macaroni must be thrown out.

"I suppose that even when Rome fell meals had to

be prepared," the Judge said as they went up the kitchen stairs, and his remark gave an insight into his evaluation of the situation.

As Anne started up the stairs she caught a glimpse of a long cavernlike succession of launderies and furnace rooms extending away beneath the front of the house.

They stood a moment in the dining room. The Judge was saying to Jeffrey, "Dr. McNeill, if you will call the Millersville police and ask for an appointment, we will go over at once. But before I go, Alice" —his wife had just come through from the pantry— "I have this letter from Fritz at Red Bank and he wants us to send on some of the manuscript of his music which he left here. He says it is the part for the percussion instruments and it's somewhere in his room. I wouldn't know the script for drums from that for the harp. Do you think you or the children could find it and attend to it? He says that someone with influence in the Philadelphia Orchestra wants to hear the dirge and he is sure it will be accepted."

Judge Rolet and his wife and the McNeills went out of the room.

"If I had my way," Tom said, "I'd dump everything belonging to the Gadarene swine out of the window and set fire to it."

"Son, that's where I agree with you," Murray Caine said. "Joan honey, if that character were not safely down in New Jersey, I should hire an armored car and see that you set up residence in it and also hire two ex-marines with pistols in black holsters on their hips to keep you always in sight."

"But, Murray darling," she said, "you shouldn't hate him so."

"Why shouldn't I?"

Tom was rummaging around in the sideboard drawer. He brought out a box of crystallized fruits and passed them to the others, taking a large sugary apricot himself.

"Look, honey," Murray said. He put a stuffed fig into his mouth and consequently spoke with some difficulty. "Didn't you gather that when your cousin took you to the Dark Hill house he was having you impersonate Isaac and he was Abraham?"

She stood with her hands on the back of one of the ribbon Chippendale chairs. Murray's statement had shocked her. She said, "Oh no, Murray. He *wouldn't*. He did go on about that story in rather a wild way, and I will admit that for a minute or two it frightened me, but then I realized that he couldn't be as crazy as all that."

Tom said excitedly, "But he is, though. That's where you're wrong, Joan. He's just as bats as all that and more so. Don't you think so, Murray?"

"I surely do," Murray answered. "If you've paid any attention to the doggoned way he goes on about not being able to finish his dirge until he has gone through the gates of death with someone he loves, then you get the connection."

Tom said, "It's Nemesis, I tell you. The family's doomed by Fate to kill our fathers and marry our mothers and be pursued by Furies and there's no hope for us!" He looked flushed and feverish and his voice was hoarse.

Joan and Murray glanced at each other, concerned about him.

Joan said, "Look, Tom, there isn't any Nemesis at all. Fritz is safely out of the way in Red Bank, and my Furies have completely left me. I haven't heard the footsteps at all since the narco-analysis and I gave them plenty of opportunity. I went out into the hospital corridor very early this morning before Murray came to get me, and ordinarily the steps simply reveled in chasing me down long corridors, but I didn't hear a thing. I'm cured, and Dr. McNeill is wonderful! . . . You'll make yourself sick, Tom, eating all those fruits before lunch."

"I'm sick already," he replied. "I'm getting a cold from that ride on the motorcycle last night, and I'm so sick about the Justice that I could lie down on the rug here and die." He sniffed and got out a handkerchief. "I suppose he'll be going to the Millersville police and getting himself arrested and hung at once."

However, this blow did not fall upon the Rolets immediately, because when Jeffrey telephoned the Millersville police he found that Murphy, the chief, was out of town; he had taken his daughter to the hospital and she was having a baby and there was no telling when he would be back. The man who answered the telephone, giving this information, sounded young and not too intelligent.

"No, I'll wait till Murphy comes back," the Judge said to Jeffrey. "He's a good man. This young chap may be all right, but I'd rather go to Murphy tomorrow. Having waited as long as this, it won't do anybody any harm to delay another night. I think I'll go up

after lunch, if you will excuse me, and lie down on my bed."

The lunch, which Anne had dreaded, passed off admirably, due largely to the determined efforts of Murray Caine and Tom to keep the conversation rolling along. Caine could talk amusingly and endlessly about porpoises and the people of Pamlico Sound, and as contrast Tom was always ready to discuss the latest peril of his hero who had recently discovered how to break the law of gravity. The Judge was tired but gave a perfect performance of a gentleman about to be arrested on a murder charge. It was as if his personal troubles had no existence, and between the discourses about porpoises and Tom's hero he asked Anne about her sons and Jeffrey's and her sailing interests and the sort of books and plays and music which she enjoyed. Mrs. Rolet, at the other end of the table, dropped off her attitude of perpetual disapproval and discussed with Jeffrey the future of Germany and its past as she had known it in Munich for a winter in 1928.

Cora did not appear in the dining room. Ordinarily she served very competently, but today, with Mrs. Rolet's permission, she put the food on the dumbwaiter and Tom and Joan and Murray pulled it up to the pantry and brought it in to the table from there.

When they finished the meal and went out into the hall, standing by stairs before the Judge went up for his rest, they had a short, significant dialogue about Cora.

Tom had hoisted himself up on the newel post, where he sat with his feet twined around it. He said unexpectedly, "I think Cora is too doggoned

unbalanced and eccentric. I don't think we ought to keep her on after the rotten lies she told about Joan that night."

"Fritz paid her for that," Mrs. Rolet said, "and she was very sorry—pitifully sorry. She begged to stay here, actually, and I would never get another maid."

"I think she's an enemy," Tom said.

"Well, possibly, but only a part-time enemy," the Judge said, "as most people are only part-time criminals, but they have to be paid full time, unhappily for them."

"And sometimes time and a half and overtime," Caine said.

The conversation seemed to Anne to be pursuing a trend which must be full of unhappiness for the Judge, so she changed the subject by asking Jeffrey if he had any plans for the afternoon.

"I'd like to go out and take a drive around, if you'll put on your coat and hat," he answered.

"We have a tea at half-past four," Mrs. Rolet said, not too stiffly. "I hope you'll be back for that."

Jeffrey told her he doubted if they would return until later.

"But you will surely be here for dinner and to spend the night, won't you?" the Judge urged them anxiously. "I seem to be relying upon you, McNeill, to see me through this interview tomorrow."

"Yes, we'll be back for dinner, thank you, and the night," Jeffrey replied.

They all dispersed then. Anne came downstairs ready to go out before Jeffrey joined her. She stood for a moment or two looking out of the door that

opened upon the porte-cochere. Rain was blowing across the lawn almost horizontally. The wet leaves of the rhododendrons glistened, and she could see the Dark Hill tower room above the tops of the trees.

Mrs. Rolet, coming down the hall from the music room, stopped and spoke to her. She said tonelessly, "I am sorry that I have seemed so hostile, Mrs. McNeill, to your husband's insistence upon the narco-analysis, but you see why I was. As I knew, it brought all this misery upon us. Everything is happening just as I feared. This spells the destruction of our family. Imagine, my husband, tried and convicted by his colleagues, by men who have been his friends! And he, apparently having betrayed everything he holds of value in conduct, in honor of living. Moreover, we have not great means. We shall have to give up this house and the town house, and how Tom will be suitably educated I don't know. He is a boy of great promise. But my husband will go down in defeat, and we with him. I see nothing but ruin for us all." She turned away, and Anne heard her going slowly upstairs as if she were too tired to drag one foot after the next.

It was a relief when Jeffrey came and they went out into the damp wind and got into their car. In three minutes they were driving out between the tall stone gateposts at the entrance of the place. The hatbox with the clay head in it was on the car floor at Anne's feet.

"Where are we bound for?" she asked.

"First to look at the bridge and then to the Millersville police."

It took them about three more minutes from the entrance of the Rolet house to the bridge where Joan had seen Nettie Noorham picked up from the river. Jeffrey stopped the car and he and Anne got out. Steep banks with hemlock and spruce and pine trees went down to the water, and now the trees bowed deeply in the wind and rain and shook drops from their branches. The bridge was of stone with a low parapet. A woman dizzy from a blow could have leaned on the wall and, presumably, fallen over; or one wishing to commit suicide could easily have jumped. Some fifty yards downstream was the muddy flat with water reeds and water-loving bushes where the body had been found.

"Do you get anything from all this?" Anne asked. She had no raincoat and turned the collar of her coat up above her neck.

"Very little," Jeffrey said. "Let's go on now to the police."

So they went to the headquarters in the Millersville town hall, a red brick modern building, self-respecting and clean. Representing authority in the office they found a red-haired young man with his feet on a desk reading a movie magazine. Embarrassed at being so caught, he removed his feet, stood up, and seemed unable to think of anything to say. Jeffrey, who was carrying the hatbox, said, "I've come to ask some questions about that unidentified woman who was found in the river in August. I am Dr. McNeill and this is my wife."

The youth nodded and said he was pleased to meet them but he didn't think he could answer any ques-

tions about that case because he had only come onto the force in September, and the chief was out, he had taken his daughter to the hospital——

"We heard," Anne said.

"You know nothing at all about the case?" Jeffrey asked.

"Well, I was in town when the body was found, and I went around with the crowd to the river when they were taking it up, but one look was enough for me."

Jeffrey had put the box on a desk and was untying it. He took the head out carefully and held it. "Does this look like the woman?" he asked.

"My gosh, yes," the man answered, in awe, "mud and all. What do you know about that! But I don't remember that the hair was done up in curlers."

"No, I doubt if it was," Jeffrey said. "Well, thanks, we'll go along now. Do you expect your chief back tomorrow?"

"Oh sure, tomorrow or the next day, depending on how his daughter gets along."

Anne put the head back into the box and tied it up.

They went out and stood a minute on the courthouse steps.

"Now where next?" Anne said, holding onto her hat.

"I suggest we go to the movies and stay there until the last possible minute before we have to go back to the Rolets' to dine."

"An excellent idea!" she said. "One of your best ones. . . . Jeffrey, do you think the Judge gave his mother an overdose of morphine?"

They went down to their car. Jeffrey opened the door for Anne and answered, "My dear, how can I tell any more than you can? But I think it possible."

They then drove down the street to the movie house, where with great enjoyment they saw a revival of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Honey chile," Murray Caine whispered into Joan's hair just slightly above her ear, "I don't suppose you realize it yourself, but your flowing contours and graceful proportions sure do give you an outstanding beauty." And he let his lips slide down her cheek to her lips and rest there, but not passively.

"Darling," she said after an interval, "you can't see my outstanding beauty at the moment."

"No, but there are better ways of being aware of beauty than by seeing, honey. Let me kiss you some more."

She kissed him, with his arms tight and still more tightly about her.

"I think," she said, "that it would be just as well at this point to have some light."

He laughed a little and she got up from the sofa and lighted the lamp on the Judge's desk. They were in his study by the firelight, and all the rest of the family and also the two McNeills had gone to bed an hour or more ago. The house was quiet except for the ticking of clocks and, from outside, the beating

of rain heavier than it had been during the day, and the sound also of wind.

With her blood throbbing hard, even in her throat, Joan sat down on a stool before the fire.

Murray took his glasses out of his pocket, put them on, and took a cigarette from a case. He said, "Honey, I've got to be getting back to work pretty soon. I'll wait until we see what those Millersville police do about your father, but no matter what happens, I can't stay off the job much longer."

"I know," she said. "You must go back."

"Now we've got those doggoned footsteps of yours licked I'm not frightened about you. When we get all this trouble of your daddy's in order, you and I are going to be married right away, aren't we?"

"Yes, Murray, we are."

"Most men pretend they'd rather sneak off to the City Hall and be married before a congregation of mahogany furniture and brass spittoons, but I like all the pretty fixings, six bridesmaids in blue with blue flowers, and a church all decked out with flowers and white ribbons, and the bride with a train reaching from the altar steps to the church door. Honey, I have a whole brainful of fireflies and butterflies dancing Strauss waltzes together, thinking about it—come on back on the sofa. I want to kiss you some more."

She said, "Darling, when you make love you go all Southern and very articulate in such a funny way, and I love it."

"Then come on back here beside me."

"Not tonight. I'm going up to bed."

"What's the matter, honey? Your voice sounds like

you've got something very heavy resting on top of you. You worried too much about your daddy?"

"Pretty much, Murray. And it's a curious thing, I can't seem to see anything beyond tomorrow. I mean, usually you have some idea of the future, but I haven't, tonight. It all seems a very high gray wall."

"Look, honey," he said with some anxiety, and sat up straighter on the sofa. "Don't let your imagination ride you again or you'll be just sending out engraved invitations for those doggoned footsteps to come runnin' back. I guess maybe you had better go on up to bed and get a good sleep after all." He rose and pushed logs to the back of the fireplace, and she plumped up the cushions on the couch. Then he put his glasses in his pocket, took her in his arms, and they kissed each other again several times until, considerably shaken with emotion, they stopped and went on upstairs where he left her at the door of her room.

She undressed, got into bed, and fell asleep sooner than she had expected, but her sleep was troubled with fragments of thoughts and dreams caused by conflicting emotions, anxiety and deep unhappiness about her father and, on the other hand, her love for Murray Caine. She had an unpleasant and involved dream about six bridesmaids in blue being chased by Fritz up and down the stairs in the Dark Hill house, and then she herself was running in a wedding dress with a long, long white satin train, up endless stairs, with footsteps pursuing her, and when they caught her she would be killed, she knew. With an effort she tore herself from sleep and sat up in bed, breathing hard and perspiring, seeing the dark gray oblongs

of her windows and hearing the rain and wind outside. She was cold and nervous and, she realized, hungry, and in a wakeful mood she knew well. She would lie awake now the rest of the night and be tired and without vitality tomorrow, unless she got some hot milk and a cracker or two. If she did that she would be apt to fall asleep again. And it was weak foolishness to be afraid of going downstairs through the dark house. The footsteps were conquered. There was nothing to fear.

She put on her wrapper and slippers and went out into the quiet hall and down the stairs.

Outside the storm beat against the walls, and inside the house seemed to be awake and tense, listening.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, her hand on the newel post, and there, coming along the hall above, were again unmistakably the footsteps. She thought in anguish, "I'm not cured at all. All that experiment was useless." The trouble had returned, worse, far worse, infinitely intensified, for now there were not only the footsteps, although without the accompanying click, but as she looked up she saw, she thought, a shadow move. She should have screamed. Later she realized, of course, that that is what she should have done, but one is so trained against giving way, so trained in self-control, and, too, she didn't want to frighten her father. "It might give him another stroke," she thought. "I'm not like Cora. I can't scream." And she thought that if she ran down the hall and through the dining room and pantry she might go up the back stairs and so reach safety in Murray's room, or the McNeills'.

She began to run and the footsteps were following

her, faster and faster, down the stairs. She glanced back, and now the hallucinations had taken visual form, but indistinct still, and the Thing, whatever, whoever it was, was in the dining room as she fled into the pantry, and there was not time for her to run up the back stairs. She had to go on down, fleeing through the darkness to the kitchen, with the feet now actually thumping after her, and a sound of breathing. Then she did call out, shrieking, "Murray—Murray—Dr. McNeee-ill," but the kitchen was so far downstairs and in a wing of the house that no one would ever hear her. There was the large food-storage room off the kitchen, and as she opened and then slammed that door behind her she heard it open again, and it was fortunate that years ago she had so often played hide-and-seek here because now the distances and the knowledge of the doors came back to her and she was able to run out of the other door of food-storage room, through the laundry and the furnace room, but it seemed as if the dimensions of these cellars were multiplied to infinity, as if she had in some way broken through the safe walls of the known world and was outside fleeing for life, beyond the regions ruled by laws of gravity and mathematics and science and actual, tangible presences, running through a black vacancy of space.

There was a little room where they used to keep apples—if she could reach it, get to it safely, and close and hold the door! And she was there jerking the door open, slipping inside and slamming it closed and bracing herself, her shoulder and all her strength against it. It was heavy, with an old-fashioned iron latch.

The Thing on the other side was pushing with all

its strength too, and the door gave a little, then opened half an inch, an inch, and all this indicated beyond doubt that she was after all mad, stark staring mad, insane, a schizophrenic, a person with dementia praecox here in the cellar trying to hold a murderous hallucination outside the door.

Then the pressure stopped, gave way. She was able to close the door, and, leaning with her back against it, gasping and shivering, she heard the footsteps retreating as if on tiptoe, but she could not hear them long because the walls of the small room were very thick. But the Thing was gone and she was alone in the darkness with the smell of apples and cement, of whitewash and cobwebs and old wood. She slipped down and sat on the cold floor with her back against the door, her head in her hands, and she shuddered until her teeth chattered, but she must not go all to pieces now, she told herself. She must summon her self-control and get back to the family and tell them, quite calmly, that she was insane and must be "put away," must give up Murray, must add to the already heavy agony of the family by this of her own. But she could shout and call from here all night and they wouldn't hear her. Moreover, there was something too ignominious about having the McNeills find her again in a situation so similar to the time before. It was repetitious and lacking in dignity. She would wait here five or ten minutes and then simply walk out through the cellars and go upstairs and tell the McNeills what had happened. She would sit here and say over to herself three poems, regaining her calm, and then go out.

By the time she had gone over Henley's *Invictus*,

Sill's *Opportunity*, and Browning's poem beginning, "Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat," she had herself well in hand. But it was not easy to step out and walk through the cellars, although the distances now had snapped back to normal space. However, she could not bring herself to light any lights, for fear that the Thing might see her, and she tiptoed as quietly as she could.

It was when she had reached the bottom of the back stairs, just outside of the kitchen, that she realized something was wrong with the floor, and her nightgown brushing across her instep felt damp, stickily damp.

There was a side-wall fixture here, and she pulled a small chain and the light lighted.

She looked down and saw that the bottom of her blue nightgown was wet and red and her white furry slippers were matted with wet redness, and under her feet, extending into the kitchen, was a pool of blood.

A frightened voice from upstairs called weakly, "I say, who is it?"

"It's Joan, Tom," she answered, and hurried up the stairs.

There was coughing in the pantry, and there was Tom, shivering in his pajamas, being very seasick indeed.

His bare feet and the bottom of his pajamas were also soaking red.

She looked at him and said, "Tom, are you hurt? What awful thing has happened to you?"

And he said, "Joan, where are you cut? My gosh, you must have sliced a dozen arteries."

She said, "There's someone dreadfully hurt down in

the kitchen, Tom. We'll have to go down and see what we can do."

"Oh my gosh, you don't think it's the Court committing suicide, do you?"

"Or Murray—killed."

Clutching each other's hands, they started down the stairs.

"What did I tell you about Nemesis," the boy whispered. His teeth were chattering. "It's waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a baseball bat and it's going to bash us on the heads next."

"Don't be absurd," she whispered. "Come on."

Upstairs in that room which was now the guest room and which had been in turn first Mrs. Rolet Sr.'s bedroom and then Tom's nursery, Anne McNeill sat up in the dark in her twin bed.

She said, "Jeffrey, did you hear anything?"

He was awake. He said, "I'm not sure. Quite some time ago I thought I heard someone call."

"And people walking about. Jeffrey, that episode of Cora worries me. Have you thought how it fits into the pattern of personality?"

"It had occurred to me." He was getting out of bed, putting on his bathrobe. "I might as well go down and see if everything is in order. You had better stay here and go back to sleep."

"Oh no," she said. "I'll come along too."

They hurried through the dark house where there seemed to be a strained atmosphere of disaster and catastrophe. There was nothing out of the way in the hall or the dining room or the pantry. There was a light at the bottom of the kitchen stairs.

Jeffrey said, "Watch out for that blood, Anne," and stepped across it into the kitchen, with Anne following him.

Joan and Tom Rolet stood looking in horror at the dumbwaiter.

Joan said, "Dr. McNeill, there is something ghastly in there. We were just about to try to open the door."

Jeffrey opened it. There was a pause.

"Who is it?" Anne asked. Beyond him she could see that a body was stuffed into the lowest shelf of the dumb-waiter. A bunch of celery and carrots seemed to be resting like flowers on its breast. She got an impression of redness where the face should have been.

Someone was running down the stairs.

Jeffrey called, "Caine, if that is you, come in here."

Murray, in his trousers and shirt, jumped across the blood and stood beside Jeffrey, who said, "Look in, will you, and see what you make of it."

Other people were coming down the stairs. There were frightened exclamations and questions, left suspended, unanswered.

Murray was peering into the dumb-waiter. He backed away and turned, his face that of a very much horrified young man. He said, "It just couldn't happen twice, you know. My God, it's a ghastly travesty with the blood all over the face, like a mask. And twice!"

"Blood like a mask!" voices echoed, and demanded who it was, what had happened, what hideous thing had happened now.

The others were coming into the room, crowding toward the dumb-waiter.

Jeffrey said sternly, "Keep back, please. It is not a pleasant sight."

But Tom had ducked under his arm and looked. "Oh gosh!" he cried out in a voice quite out of control. "Look at the ear like an oyster shell, will you—oh my gosh—it's the Perennial Menace—it's Nettie Noorham, come up out of hell to persecute us some more and she had to die twice to do it. Oh my gosh, my golly! Who stuck the carving knife into her and the bouquet of celery on her breast? Nettie Noorham—Nettie——" He backed away, hit against the kitchen table, knocked over one chair, and dropped into another with his head on his arms on the table's white surface. There he sobbed and trembled and laughed, and for a moment or two the kitchen was in a confusion, with people pushing to look into the dumbwaiter and Murray Caine trying to keep Joan away from it and Anne trying to get Tom to drink some water and quiet down.

"Everybody, please stand just where you are and be quiet," Jeffrey ordered with an authority in his voice that made the room still. "The body is not to be touched. Nothing is to be touched at all. I shall have to notify the police at once, and the medical examiner."

The Judge, having seen all he wanted to, sank into the Boston rocker. He leaned his head back and gasped.

"Can you identify this body?" Jeffrey asked.

The Judge and Mrs. Rolet said at once, "It is Nettie Noorham."

"But how—how can it be *possibly?*" Joan cried. "I saw her being lifted up, drowned, out of the river."

"Obviously you were mistaken in that identification," Jeffrey answered.

"Then I didn't kill her!" the Judge exclaimed. He was breathing heavily.

"I hope not," Jeffrey answered. "Anne, you'd better get that boy something to quiet him down and stop his trembling. I am going to telephone."

"And I think that this is the time," the Judge said, "to have something to drink, all of us. This has been an incredible shock. Alice, is there enough whisky in the decanter on the dining-room sideboard?"

"I think there is," she answered, "but oh, please, I'll get some kitchen toweling up in the pantry—the blood on your feet."

"I'm sorry," Jeffrey said. "Everybody must stay right here, and the blood is not to be removed—particularly, I am sorry to say, on the feet of Joan and Tom. You can come up with me and get the whisky for them, Anne." He went out of the room with Anne.

Murray Caine took Joan in his arms. He said, "Honey, this is the time when you do have to show that you have rugged, extra-strength, all-metal construction."

"But, darling," she said, and smoothed his arm with her fingers, "I'm all right, don't you see? It's shocking about Nettie, but really wonderful about me because I am not stark, staring mad or a schizophrenic and this time the footsteps were not imaginary and I wasn't pursued by any hallucination because it must have been Nettie who was chasing me."

It was just as Anne came back with a decanter and

a tray of glasses that the Judge said, "Tom, what were you doing downstairs at this time of night in your pajamas?"

"I thought I heard Joan scream," he said. "Honestly, Justice, that's all there was to it. My gosh, I suppose everybody's going to think I stuck the knife into the Menace. Oh golly, I suppose now we've got to go through the rack and thumbscrews and rubber hoses of questioning."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Once Dr. Tillingham, the coroner, had come, made his examination, and gone, leaving in charge a stout and horrified young Swede, Jameson, the chief of the Claesburg police. Jameson was assisted by one of his subordinates called Stukes, a nondescript youth notable only for his extreme shyness and inability to take notes without covering his whole notebook with ink from a leaking fountain pen. They had examined the victim, taken the necessary measurements; they had been disgusted at the bouquet of celery and carrot tops, had studied the floor, the doors and windows, the locks, the cellar, had asked many questions and finally moved the body out onto the floor and covered it with a red-and-white checked tablecloth that had been in the kitchen cabinet. Jeffrey had telephoned the nearest funeral parlor.

The knife lay on paper on the kitchen table.

Murray Caine had lighted a coal fire in the old range so the room was warm enough, and Anne had gone upstairs and found Tom's bathrobe and brought that down as well as several blankets. He was now

swaddled in blue layers but in spite of that still shivered now and then and sneezed.

Cora had been aroused and requested to come downstairs. Dressed in decorous black uniform, she sat, prim and disapproving, in a straight chair near the stove.

Jameson knew Jeffrey by reputation and regarded him with an awe that effectually oiled the gears of co-operation. Hence he and Jeffrey were carrying on the questioning together.

"You knew that this woman here, Nettie Noorham, was in the house?" he asked Cora.

"Sure I knew. She come a little while after lunch yesterday."

"Was that when you screamed?" Jeffrey asked.

"No, it was before lunch I screamed."

"Were you surprised to see Nettie Noorham?"

"Why should I be surprised when she wrote me she was coming to try to get some money out of the Judge."

"What's this, blackmail?" Jameson took in this fact with more alertness than one would have expected from him.

Cora looked at the floor before answering, and the officer repeated the question. With some reluctance the cook muttered, "Miss Noorham said the Judge had made some passes at her and treated her in a way that wasn't right. I don't know nothing about it myself."

"And that whole story was fabricated by Miss Noorham out of thin air," the Judge was explaining in angry repudiation.

But scandalous as the accusation was, it was far

better than the other, that the Judge had caused his mother's death. That would doubtless have had to be investigated, whereas this, althought uncomfortable and humiliating, would be believed by only a very few enemies and lovers of the sensational and could easily be lived down.

It was evident that Cora, the part-time enemy, was trying to make amends, not telling all she knew.

Jameson asked, unbelievingly, "This woman, this Miss Noorham here, she was trying to blackmail you, Judge?"

"Yes, for many years."

The officer looked at Jeffrey. "There you are, Doc, there's our motive dished right out for us. Yes?"

"I doubt," he replied, "if it is as simple as that. Cora, you knew that this family thought Nettie Noorham was dead. How long have you known that she was alive?"

The cook smiled, savoring the memory of her secret. Now was the time, she saw, to enjoy the triumph of it, the humor and joy of having known much, much more than the whole Rolet family. She said, "Oh well, for a while there I thought she was dead too. I heard Miss Joan telling her mother about how she had seen them taking Miss Noorham's body up out of the river. So of course I thought she was dead until it came out that somebody turned up and said it was their sister who had committed suicide. She'd come through town on a trailer and one night she'd jumped off the bridge. They paid for the burial and the stone and all, and then one day I got a letter from Nettie, so I knew she was alive all right, and when I got that letter I just sat in that rocking chair there and laughed

my head off because here she was alive and the whole family was having conniptions thinking she was dead!" At the memory of that irresistible joke she laughed again.

Tom said to his father, "You remember, we heard her that day in the garden."

The Judge nodded.

Jeffrey was speaking to Cora again, saying, "And you didn't tell the Rolets?"

"Why should I?" She spoke as one having an old grudge. "They've never listened to anything I wanted to say. There's lots of things going on in this town and Millersville, but they're too high and mighty to listen to what people do in hick towns like these."

"Oh, Cora, it isn't that at all," Mrs. Rolet defended herself quickly. "It is just that we have a family policy against gossip. We never listen to gossip of any kind."

"But, Jeffrey, that man at the Millersville headquarters recognized the clay head," Anne reminded him.

"He was vague about it. One face covered with mud looks pretty much like another."

Judge Rolet, sitting in the rocking chair, looked at Jameson and asked if he could ask Cora a question. He was given permission.

"Cora, was Nettie Noorham hurt at all by the paperweight?" he asked.

"No, that was what was so funny, Judge Rolet," she answered, unexpectedly smiling rather pleasantly. "She told me all about it up in me room this afternoon. 'There was the Judge,' she says to me, 'sittin'

behind his desk holdin' the paperweight. It was just before he had his stroke, I guess,' she says, 'because his face was as red as a beet and he was breathin' fast but he said somethin',' she says, 'that made me lose my temper and I run across the room and grab that paperweight out of his hand and before I knew what I was doing I hit him with it in the head and it cut his head some and he slipped down onto the floor and I thought,' she says, 'there, Nettie Noorham, you've killed him, but I spilled over a bottle of red ink and put it all over me hand and run out of the room screamin', and there was Mrs. Rolet and Miss Joan in the hall, and I said the Judge had thrown the paperweight at me and hit me in the head, and that ink run down from under me hand like blood as I run out of the door.' That was what she told me this afternoon up in my room."

"A very interesting story indeed," the Judge said dryly.

"Yes, sir, when she knew that everybody here thought you had killed her yourself, Judge Rolet, she sat on me bed and laughed her head off."

"And then"—Joan spoke from across the room where she and Murray were sitting on straight chairs, side by side—"that woman came downstairs in the middle of the night and chased me through the cellars. Why did she, Cora? Did she want to hurt me, or kill me?"

Cora pursed her lips and then, relaxing them, replied, "I couldn't say, miss. I know she wasn't too fond of you, and never had been, thinking you had everything in life and she had nothing as it were. And

I told her about your footsteps. She thought that was awful funny too. Maybe she thought it would be a good joke to scare you a little."

"I see. So, hearing me go downstairs, she followed and chased me. She was a fiend, Murray, she really was a fiend."

"Honey, she was"—gently—"but she's dead now."

"Yes, and we've got to find out who killed her," Jameson declared angrily, and turned to Tom who was sitting near the stove. He looked at him, trying to terrify him, and the others in the room braced themselves for an unendurable scene and perhaps for an admission they dreaded to hear.

"What were you doing downstairs at that time of night?" he asked.

Tom divested himself of some of his swathing blankets. He answered, "Something woke me and I thought it was Joan calling, and the sound seemed to come from way downstairs, very far away."

"That was when I did call," she said.

Jameson said, "Please, miss, I'll get to you in a minute," but he did not speak to her unkindly or with a threat. "Now, Tom, go on. You say you heard your sister call?"

"Yes, so I got up and looked in her room and she wasn't there."

"Why did you not wake someone else and tell them?"

"I didn't want to rout anyone else out. I thought she might have gone down to get some hot milk or crackers."

"Which is exactly what I did do," she said. "Excuse me, Mr. Jameson."

"And then," Tom went on, "I lighted lights here and there and looked in Father's study and so on, but she wasn't anywhere around, and the fire needed fixing, a log had fallen too far forward and I was afraid a spark might jump over the fender and set the rug on fire, and by that time I was thinking I hadn't heard Joan scream after all."

"But where did you think she was, since she was not in her bedroom?"

"Well, I thought perhaps she had gone up to her studio to do some modeling, she does sometimes. But anyway, I went into the pantry to see if she was there, and she wasn't, and then I went on down the stairs to the kitchen and stepped into all that damned blood. First I felt it and then I found the light and pulled it on, and my gosh——"

"You didn't go into the kitchen to see the cause of it?"

"I was so seasick I had to make for the pantry upstairs."

"Didn't you think your sister had been hurt, or killed?"

"I was so sick I didn't think anything. It was just as if I had been kicked hard in the stomach. I guess I didn't shine out as a very hot hero, did I?" He sounded very much ashamed of himself.

"And now how about you, miss?" Jameson turned to Joan. "What was you doing downstairs chasing around the house at that hour? Dr. McNeill, it's all right to question her next, isn't it?"

Jeffrey was standing against the sink, his eyes on the red-and-white checked object lying on the floor. He nodded in answer to Jameson.

Joan explained, "I couldn't sleep and came downstairs to get some milk and crackers," and she told the story of that terrifying few minutes of pursuit and escape and hiding in the apple room. She told it with a degree of understatement that was effective and convincing. The simplicity of her blue bathrobe became her. The dark bang of hair across her forhead and its straight length to the shoulder and the long lines of her robe gave her a medieval look, very appealing.

Jameson, who had always thought her the prettiest girl in Claesburg, believed her account without reservation. He also had known, from the minute he saw the situation here, who had killed the woman and put her in the dumb-waiter. It was one of the easiest cases he had ever seen.

"Okay, miss," he said. "That sounds straight to me. Doesn't it to you?" He deferred again to Jeffrey, who looked up and nodded. "But now you, Tom Rolet"—his voice became rough—"I'd like for you to stop this lying and tell the truth now, because we're going to get tough with you if you don't come clean."

The boy's face grew frightened and white. He said, "But I haven't been lying. That's the absolute truth I told you."

"Maybe as far as it went, but you left out a whole lot. You come down into the kitchen and here was this woman who you knew had been blackmailing your father and you saw red and you grabbed up a carving knife and let her have it. Then maybe some noise scared you and you stuffed the body in the dumb-waiter, but you thought it would be funny to cross her hands on her breast and put a bokay of celery and carrots in them. Boy, that give you away." He

looked at Jeffrey. "That's where psychology comes in, isn't it, Doc? That's just the sort of thing a kid of his age would do, thinking it was funny. Boy, I arrest you for the murder of this woman Nettie Noorham. Okay, Dr. McNeill?"

Whatever Jeffrey answered was lost in cries of horrified protest from the family.

Tom stood and stepped forward holding onto the kitchen table. He looked as if he were feeling extremely seasick again. But he said with dignity, "You've got me all wrong, Officer. Even if I had killed her, which I didn't because I didn't know she was in the house, my gosh, I thought the woman had died a month ago. If I'd seen her down here in the kitchen I'd have run and never stopped running. Can't you see that?"

They could see that, but they could also see here, tragically, a sensitive and impulsive boy, whose love for his father, his desire to protect him, his family loyalty might well drive him to a sudden desperation, even to murder. He was not so far in age from the time when he, as all small boys, used to run around armed with toy pistols shouting, "Stick 'em up, stick 'em up—I've killed him." To the young, death, except of a parent, is a minor incident of life.

It was so agonizingly apparent and possible that Tom might have killed the woman under the red-and-white checked tablecloth on the floor.

He was saying, with heartbreaking earnestness, "But look, if I had killed her I would never have put those doggoned carrots and celery in her hands. It's—it's just not the proper way to treat a dead person, no matter who. It's not proper."

"Proper." "Proper?" "Properly." The word acted

as a cue to an idea in Anne's mind. She got up from the straight chair where she had been sitting, went over to Jeffrey, and whispered to him, "The man who never did anything properly."

"It may be," he said.

"But are you going to let them take Tom off to jail now?" she asked in a low tone, indignantly.

He turned to Jameson and said, "I think we are on the wrong trail entirely. I suggest that we search this house, thoroughly, at once."

The group looked at him in unhappy bewilderment. The problem lay on the floor before them. The answer had seemed to be here in this room. Now this deviation was confusing to everyone.

"Caine, will you come up with me?" Jeffrey said.

"Certainly," he answered, "but I don't quite get you, McNeill."

But Tom cried out in excitement, hoarsely, for his cold was developing in his throat now, "Oh, I get you, Dr. McNeill. I bet you anything that's it. I never did believe the grocer's boy put the macaroni down Cora's neck. He's an awfully reserved sort of guy and he reads Shakespeare and Voltaire."

This character sketch of the grocer's boy came floating up to Jeffrey and Anne as they hurried up the kitchen stairs with Caine following them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As they went throught the swinging door from the pantry into the dining room they heard something upstairs, moving very quietly, and it was impossible in that large house, with its dim lights, its dead woman, and the frightened people in the kitchen, not to think of Joan's footsteps. Were they not still here, going from room to room, coming down the hall, imprinted upon the atmosphere, a manifestation of the force of hatred? And had not this family perhaps become the object of a succession of inescapable disasters, as does sometimes happen? How often one shocking event after another, blow upon blow, falls upon some staggering household until it is beaten down into defeat.

Was there anything that could save the boy Tom from being taken off to some cage of a town jail?

There were surely sounds upstairs, and Caine whispered, "There is someone in the house."

And Anne answered, also whispering, "Of course."

Light from the upper hall shone for an instant on the pistol in Jeffrey's hand.

They saw the man tiptoeing down the stairs. He

had a brief case in one hand and a suitcase in the other. He wore his hat and overcoat.

Jeffrey stepped out of the shadowy doorway of the dining room and said, "Good evening, Mr. Rolet. Would you be kind enough to come into the library with me for a few minutes?"

Fritz Rolet stood on the bottom step of the stairs. He was startled, but quickly regained his poise. He looked at Jeffrey and saw the pistol, looked at Anne and Murray Caine.

He said agreeably, "I'm extremely sorry, but I have to catch a bus from Millersville. I just dropped in here ten minutes ago to pick up a few clothes and the cello part for my dirge. I should enjoy nothing better, Dr. McNeill, than a pleasant chat with you and your wife, but I simply have to catch that bus. I don't want to disturb my dear cousins to drive me over. As I came in the house I saw that the whole family seemed to be enjoying themselves in a gay little party in the kitchen—a little eccentric at this hour of the night, perhaps, but, after all, why not? I don't suppose you would care to drive me over, would you, Caine?"

"Thank you, no," Murray replied with emphasis.

"I hardly thought so. Well then, I'll just be wafting my way along."

Caine moved and stood with his back against the front door. He said, "No, you don't, Fritz. You stay right here."

Fritz put down his suitcase and brief case, took off his hat and coat and put them on a chair by the bottom of the stairs. He stepped over to Murray Caine and said, "My dear King of the Porpoises, must I use force?" But there was something spurious about the

threat, artificial and theatrical, because one knew that he could not use force if he tried. It was a gift he did not possess.

Anne watched the man, intuitively convinced that he had killed Nettie Noorham. But how was he to be implicated? And how could Jeffrey possibly save Tom from arrest?

Behind them people were coming up from the kitchen, through the pantry and dining room.

Jeffrey said, "Rolet, why did you murder Nettie Noorham?" Obviously his strategy in this case was to be swift attack.

"Murder Nettie Noorham!" Fritz's voice slid up into falsetto. "What in heaven's name do you mean, man. She died in the river in August. Her body was pulled up out of the mud. Joan saw her."

"Don't take the trouble to lie," Jeffrey said. "You didn't come into this house ten minutes ago. You came before lunch yesterday and dropped macaroni down Cora's neck. You knew that Nettie Noorham came in the afternoon. You have been here. You killed her about an hour ago, stuffed her body into the dumbwaiter, and put a bunch of carrots and celery on her breast—a thoroughly characteristic touch."

"But it's fantastic! It's chimerical!" Fritz cried, with shrillness in his voice. "I never heard of such utter boshtosh, such nonsense. I'll sue you for slander, McNeill! What in heaven's name makes you think I killed her?"

"Because, Mr. Rolet," Jeffrey said quietly, "my wife saw you do it. She heard Joan call and went down to find her. She saw you, from the kitchen door."

Nothing that her husband had ever said had as-

tounded Anne as did this simple but entirely fabricated statement.

The group behind them—the Judge and Mrs. Rolet, Tom and Joan, Jameson and young Sturkes—stood in the hall silent in astonishment.

Fritz Rolet swayed a little. He spread out his hands and looked at them as if they were strange appendages to his arms that he had never seen before. His nails were lacquered a deep blood red.

He sighed and looked up at Jeffrey.

Jameson pushed his way through the group. He said roughly, "Mr. Fritz Rolet, did you murder that woman downstairs?"

"Oh, of course," Fritz admitted wearily. "Who else, my good man, who else? Dr. McNeill, I suppose I should tender you my sword in admission of my surrender?"

"Quite unnecessary," Jeffrey answered curtly. "Let's continue this conference in the library."

They were in the Judge's study: the McNeills, Jameson and the young assistant, all the Rolets, and Cora the cook. At the moment Jameson was getting some information from Fritz and writing it down in a notebook.

Anne and Jeffrey sat on the sofa. She whispered to him. "But, my dear, why did you say I had seen him kill the woman? I've never heard you lie before in your life."

"There always has to be a first time," he said somewhat defensively, also whispering, "I knew I had to take drastic measures to force an admission from him. I did it to spare the boy a long-drawn-out and

damaging experience. I was convinced Rolet had killed her and knew that if he was definitely accused he'd melt like soap."

"But you took such a chance. What if he hadn't?"

"My dear, he has never combated anything in his life. I knew that the thing to do was to take a strong line and we had him."

"Well, you certainly took a strong line."

Jameson looked up and closed his notebook. He said, "Dr. McNeill, would you like to ask some questions?"

"I'd like to ask one or two of Cora," Jeffrey answered. He turned to her and said, "Yesterday, when you screamed, was it because Mr. Fritz came into the kitchen and put the macaroni down the back of your neck?"

She replied sullenly, "Yes, sir, I thought he was in Red Bank, and then he appeared, like a hallucination. He put his arms around me neck, from behind me, and kissed me and whispered in me ear that he had dropped a snake down the back of me uniform, so I screamed bloody murder, as who wouldn't, me having a fear of snakes since I was a child."

Fritz made a gesture with his hand and said, "It was just in fun."

"It was that fun, and the disgusting bunch of carrots and celery, that gave you away," Jeffrey said.

"Was it disgusting? I thought it rather funny. I couldn't resist it," Fritz said.

The Judge made a sound of abhorrence.

Jeffrey said dryly, answering Fritz, "Exactly. *You* couldn't resist it. That is what I thought when I saw it first. Now tell me, please, yesterday, after you had

dropped the macaroni down Cora's neck, I suppose you went upstairs somewhere and hid, perhaps in one of the other servants' rooms that are unused?"

"Right you are, sir. Right you are the first time." Fritz assumed a cockney accent. "But it wasn't in one of the servants' rooms. I simply went up to my room, locked the door, and slept until around the middle of the night."

"And I presume that you went downstairs, heard Nettie Noorham chasing your cousin Joan through the cellar, that you got the knife from the kitchen drawer, lurked in the corner of the stairs, and killed her."

"Right you are, sir, right you are, although I deplore the melodramatic term 'lurked.' "

"Why did you kill her, Fritz?" the Judge asked. He leaned forward across his desk, holding the paperweight in his hands.

"But what else could you possible expect me to do?" Fritz answered. "Of course I killed her to protect the rest of you. I sacrificed myself to save you all from years of blackmail and torment, to protect you, Uncle Joseph, from exposure and professional ruin." He began to laugh and swing himself back and forth in his chair, making hysterical noises. "Funny!" he gasped. "It's the funniest damn situation I ever heard of, all of it. I killed her to protect you all and to make restitution, to offer up my own soul and body in restitition for what I did to Joan"—his voice softened —"locking her in that house there with the poor ghost of Kitty Aldrich swaying from the crystal chandelier." He began to sob a little. "Evil, evil, I was conceived in sin and born in evil—neither man nor woman,

neither beast nor human—the bells—the bells—McNeill, I want to tell you something, not fit for human ears. In the hall, please—Caine, the King of the Porpoises, you come too——"

"Jeffrey, don't," Anne warned him, and Joan tried to keep Murray back, but the two men were following Fritz Rolet out into the hall, shutting the door.

Inside, the people waited. The Judge turned the paper weight this way and that. He murmured, "A sorrowful ending, a tragic ending."

Tom sat on a stool by the fire, his arms around his knees, his head on his arms.

Mrs. Rolet said something in a low tone about her cosmos being broken and beaten down by the storm.

Morning was coming. Outside of the window it was beginning to grow light and the rain seemed to be stopping.

It was then that they heard the shot from the hall, that Anne thought, "He killed Murray Caine—or Jeffrey!" and thought, simultaneously, of her own agonizingly lonely life ahead and of the fatherlessness of the two little boys.

She was the first in the hall. But it was Fritz Rolet who was lying at their feet, and blood came from his shirt, flowing down, slowly making the dark blue of his suit darker, slowly dripping down onto the tiled floor.

He was lying there smiling a little at the audience as they grouped around him. This was his moment, his big scene.

He said, gasping, "For once I pulled it off, didn't I? I had you fooled, even the great McNeill. All the time I had the revolver in my pocket. Death, in my

pocket all the time." He began to laugh. "Managed to do one thing properly—restitution, my darling Joan —one thing properly—to die."

But he had not yet died. There followed moments of activity and confusion: of Jeffrey's demanding cotton and bandages, of Mrs. Rolet running upstairs, and down, fetching things, of Cora's standing there crying loudly, of Murray Caine telephoning for an ambulance, of Jeffrey's cutting Fritz's coat and shirt and trying to stop the bleeding and bandage the bullet hole.

"It's useless," Fritz kept protesting. "I did a good thorough job this time, I tell you. Let me up, McNeill —let me up quick. I've got to get to the piano, I tell you." He pushed himself up, resting on his elbow. Mrs. Rolet started to protest, saying that he mustn't move, that he must lie flat and wait for the ambulance. "Be quiet!" he ordered her. "Don't speak, anybody, listen! My God, I hear it!" His voice dropped. "Listen! The end of my dirge."

He looked off, across the hall, through the door of the library, listening.

No one spoke.

"I've got it now," he cried. "I'll take it down when I get to the hospital. . . . There are the brasses—now the wood winds—now the strings—now the full orchestra—wonderful—superb!"

He lay back and, with an expression of unutterable satisfaction, whispered again, "Superb," and, very feebly, clapped his hands in applause. Then the fingers clenched, tightened, and his hands fell.

Jeffrey said quietly, "He has died."

"Before he could get down the end of his dirge," Joan said. "Oh, what a pity! What a pity!"

"Honey," Murray Caine said gently, "don't grieve. Your cousin will be a whole lot happier than he ever was here. He'll be able to sit in the Green Pastures and play his Shepherd's Dirge all through on his harp now. The Lord will forgive him his trespasses, bad as he was. And he heard his dirge's end because he paid for it."

"Paid for it?" Joan asked.

"Yes, he surely paid for the end of his piece of music with a blood sacrifice. He surely killed the thing he loved best in all the world, which was himself."

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"The Trouble With Me Is Simply Imagination,"

Joan was alone in her parents' house. Something made her straighten tensely, her eyes frightened. Her heart was pounding and her hands turned cold. Something was moving. She heard the faint footsteps.

She went into her own room, opened her closet door, and pushed aside the dresses. There was nothing.

She heard the sound again. Or did she? She would not give in to her hysteria. It took all her courage to go into her parents' room. It was empty. She flung open the door of her mother's closet. Nothing. Her confidence returning, she opened her father's closet. There, crouched down below his hanging suits, was a figure. . . .

The Footsteps

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